The WIZARD of ZACNA

The Lost City of the Mayas

T. A. WILLARD

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Messengers arrived from Lacan demanding the return of the Princess

(See page 199)

THE WIZARD OF ZACNA

A Lost City of the Mayas

REMARKABLE ADVENTURES OF AN AHMEN, WIZARD AND MYSTIC OF YUCATAN, IN AN UNKNOWN COUNTRY TO WHICH THE ANCIENT MAYAS HAD FLED, LEAVING THEIR GREAT STONE CITIES SILENT AND DESOLATE TO BE OVERGROWN WITH FOREST AND JUNGLE

By

T. A. WILLARD

Author of

"THE CITY OF THE SACRED WELL"

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Dedication

TO

SEÑOR EDUARDO MARTINEZ C

WHO HAS SO FAITHFULLY RESTORED THE GREAT MAYAN TEMPLE OF KUKULCAN IN THE ANCIENT CITY OF CHICHEN-ITZA

Illustrations

By Señor Caceres Novello and Gordon Barrick

Messengers arrived from Lacan demanding the return of the Princess . . . *Frontispiece*

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I leaped from my litter and grasped a spear . . 100

I crushed her to me and pressed kisses upon her face 166

The King's friendly smile left his face 176

The WIZARD *of* ZACNA

CHAPTER I

IN one of those ruined Maya cities of Yucatan—crumbling relics of an ancient and mysterious civilization—whose monuments and art and undeciphered records reveal so little and conceal so much of their origin and history, Thomas Cranton had lingered to poke about among the jungle-overgrown mounds with the hope of finding something of interest to report to his museum.

So old, so ruined and so overgrown was the place that its very existence had passed from the memory of man, although a trail—what passed in that little-traveled region as a highway—apparently ran through its very center. Only a carved stone block, obtruding beside the path, would lead one to suspect what might be hidden from the eye within that dense forest which encroached on either side of the trail.

The dimensions and shape of the stone and its rounded upper surface revealed to an antiquarian that it was a stone of sacrifice on which, in ancient days, the human victim was stretched upon his back, his arms and legs held firmly by four men against his struggles, while a high priest, with an obsidian-bladed knife, cut out his heart as an offering to placate one of the rapacious dieties who, the ancient Mayas believed, controlled their destinies.

The presence of the stone beside the trail indicated to Cranton that somewhere near by must be the shrine or temple to a god, unless the stone had been removed from its original position and placed beside the path. As it weighed at least a ton, that seemed improbable. Yet it was apparent that it had aroused no curiosity in the passing natives as to what else of interest might lie behind it or about it. He could recall no printed record of a ruined city at that place.

Alone and unaided—for he had sent his small party ahead to find a suitable spot for making camp for the night—his search was limited not only by the time he could give to it, but by the constant need to use his *machete* to clear away the tough and tangled vegetation that barred his way. He succeeded, however, in finding a high mound from which he could descry, both to east and west of the trail, other eminences that he could not doubt were of human construction; and that beneath the soil and trees that covered them, jutting up through the surface here and there, were the remains of long abandoned palaces and temples.

For that day, he could only note down the site for possible future excavation and research by a better equipped expedition than the one with which he was just completing his apprenticeship as a working archaeologist. His task of plotting the topographical details and photographing the architectural features of the ruined city of Tuluum finished, his chief had hastened north to Merida, the modern capital city, and left Cranton to conduct thither, at a more leisurely pace, their small band of native helpers laden with their equipment and such portable curios as had escaped the searches of earlier visitors.

Thomas Cranton was young, only a short time out

of college; and this was his first experience in independent command, the first time he had been placed in a position of authority. That he had had the good fortune to pick up by the very roadside the clue to an undiscovered, unknown, unnamed city of any importance filled him with elation. In putting this place upon the map, he felt that he would put himself there also. It was an achievement that, he believed, would commend him further to the approval of his friend, Pedro Cocom, who had already commanded his admiration by being the father of the most beautiful girl in Merida as well as an interesting and prominent authority on the ancient civilization of Yucatan.

As he grew so impatient to force his way that he scarcely cut sufficient passage for his body, he became oblivious of the intense heat, the clouds of mosquitoes which he had stirred up and of the havoc wrought upon his shirt and trousers by the sharp twigs and spiny thorns. And when he had emerged upon the trail a few rods north of his point of entrance, he celebrated his discovery with enthusiasm by giving three ringing cheers for Tom Cranton, explorer and archaeologist.

As the cheers rang through the silent forest, he pinned an imaginary medal on his chest and doffed his hat in a sweeping bow to his startled audience of birds, butterflies and mosquitoes, and—could he be dreaming, or was that a human figure which now sat upon the stone of sacrifice?

Doubtfully, Cranton approached the stranger. It seemed that he must have evoked from a tomb in the buried city, the wraith of its original founder—so ancient, so unperturbed, so unreal did he appear in the deepening afternoon shadow; and he would have been no more surprised to see him fade away and vanish into

nothingness, than he had been to see him there at all. The nearer he approached to it, the more weird and eery did the figure appear, confirming rather than dispelling his first impressions. Tall and lean and sinewy and brown, long white hair falling almost to his shoulders, he sat naked upon the rock, his arms resting upon his knees and his eyes fastened with absorbed gaze upon something held between his hands.

As he paid no heed to Cranton's presence, the youth ventured nearer, and discovered that what he held and gazed at—or rather, into—was a *zaztun,* or crystal ball. Cranton had heard, and was later to have proof, that the wise men of the Mayas, even to this day, see many strange and marvelous things in the *zaztun,* obscure to the uninitiated, but useful to those who are able to read its messages.

If he were, as the young explorer suspected, an *ahmen,* or wise man, and not a mere figment of his excited imagination, it seemed to him that he must be the dean of all wizards of Yucatan. For, though his body and limbs were as smooth, as firm and as clear-skinned as those of an athlete, his face was lined and wrinkled and weather-beaten to the texture and semblance of a mummy's. That, and his long, bony, discolored hands and almost claw-like fingers, betokened an age that even the younger man's sprightly imagination dared not measure.

How long he stood there, fascinated, hesitating to disturb his meditations, yet loath to leave him without satisfying his curiosity in regard to him, he did not know. But at last, the old man slowly straightened up, turned half around, produced a square cloth from behind the stone, carefully wrapped the crystal in it and replaced it in his henequin bag. As he turned back and

faced Cranton, the latter noted that his eyes were blue and that above the left one a single lock of glossy black hair, the breadth of two fingers, swept back from his high forehead to mingle with the white. For the first time, he deigned to notice the intruder, though it was evident that it was not the first time he had been aware of him.

"Greetings, *paal batab,* who makes the forest echo with the shouts of his triumphs," he said pleasantly, in a rich sonorous voice that betrayed no quavering tones of age. His addressing him *paal batab*—"young chieftain" in the Maya tongue—took the edge from his gentle sarcasm.

"Greetings to you, venerable sage," replied Cranton, in unconscious imitation of the other's manner of speech. "If I had known I had a human audience, I should have taken my self-acclaimed honors more modestly, and in a manner not to disturb your communings with the unseen world."

"With no other world than this, *batab,* and not unseen, since I see only what happens or has happened. And so, as wisdom comes with years, one may foresee with sureness what is about to happen."

"How can that be? Does man have the power to peer into the future?"

"In a measure," was his answer. "It is the gift of all men who have the knowledge to use it. All facts have relations to other facts, and life moves in lines controlled by them. It is like the sights upon a gun. When you set one sight in line with the other sight, and the weapon is loaded right, if you pull the trigger and your hand is steady, you know that you will hit the mark. The more facts that you can get into line, the greater certainty of what will happen.

"Take your own life, *paal batab*. In some way you heard about the ancient Mayas, and you desired to learn more about them. By chance, it was your fortune to join the party of an explorer who was coming here. You visited and studied the remains of one ruined city. One does not need to be a wizard to know that it would make you happy to discover another ruined city that no other white man had ever seen; or that, passing this way, the sight of this stone would have sent you into the forest in search of other stones. It is all very simple when one has the knowledge. The Indians today have neither the knowledge nor the ambition. Hence, the credit of the discovery is yours."

"Oh, rather not," Cranton protested diffidently. "You knew about it. You've probably always known about it. Where do I come in?"

"Through the gate I leave open to you. All the ruined cities of Yucatan are known to me, and to many of the cities now known to others, I have led those who wished to find them. Such has been my occupation, and my occupation has been my reward."

It occurred to the ambitious explorer that if what the old man said were true, he might be a valuable coadjutor in any future explorations he should undertake. It was evident that this was not an ordinary Indian and, whether his claims were justified or not, his own brief biographical sketch, vague as it was, showed him to be a man of shrewd understanding. Cranton wished to know more about him.

"And what is your name, ancient *ahmen?*" he asked. "And, if the question is not too impertinent, why do you sit here on a rock in the jungle clad only in the suit nature gave you?"

A smile flitted across the wrinkled face. "You have

answered your own question in asking it, *batab*. My parents, doubtless thinking me wise in choosing them, named me after the wise *ahmen*. As for your second question, I am but just returned from a cool and refreshing bath in one of the *cenotes* of this well-buried city you have just discovered. Your work has made you hot and tired. Twigs and leaves are in your hair, sweat and earth are on your body and clothes. If you will turn about, get down on your hands and knees and crawl fifteen paces through that little opening among the roots of the *sapotes*, you will find the entrance. The pool is wide and deep enough for swimming. And if your gratitude is equal to the favor, have the goodness to bring out with you the few clothes I have washed and left to dry there."

"I need a bath," agreed Cranton, "but it is growing late and I have several miles to go. Besides, I should like to talk more with you. I'll get your laundry and—"

"Take your time. Afterward, I shall go with you," he interrupted. "Some one comes who has been searching for me many years, and one I much desire to meet. So I have put myself where he will pass. It is a private matter of long standing—and concerns a woman. And it is more than an affair over a woman—it is the finish of a fight," he added.

Cranton betook himself toward the pool with alacrity at this hint so significantly dropped, as much in order to conceal his amusement at the thought of that antique relic figuring as a hero of romance, as to avail himself of the pleasure of a plunge in the *cenote*. He found the entrance without difficulty, which led down several feet through a ruined opening of large squared stones to what appeared to be a natural pool, artificially enlarged. The water was fresh and clear and

cool, and he was tempted to linger in it, but his curiosity prompted him to hasten back in time to catch at least a glimpse of the anticipated arrival. He was so eager that he did not stop to dress, but gathered up Ahmen's clothes with his and crept noiselessly through the root-arched tunnel to the trail. He paused a little back of the opening to peer out ahead of him.

It was evident that he had arrived in time for the actual encounter. For, although when he first observed his wizard friend, he was sitting upon the stone of sacrifice precisely as he had left him; at that very instant he stood erect, alert, faced the south, and took a step or two in that direction. Cranton followed his gaze down the path, along which staggered as evil a looking thing as ever masqueraded in the form of a man. A broad belt, from which a flap fell down in front and back, was his only garment, a band around the grey mat of hair that was gathered into a scanty braid behind, his only adornment; in one hand he carried a curious stick with a curved end and in the other a short, flint-tipped lance or dart.

To Cranton, Ahmen had seemed incredibly old, but preserving in age, the dignity of a noble manhood. But this weazened figure with its disease-enlarged joints and distorted body, looked more like some animated corpse from an ancient cemetery hideously come to life, and maliciously intent on letting loose upon earth all the abominations he had brought with him from the Satanic regions.

Peering uncertainly ahead with rheumy eyes and stumbling onward in the relentless jog-trot which is the natural gait of the southern tribes, he had approached to within fifty feet of Ahmen before he suddenly perceived him. He stopped abruptly. A violent shiver ran

through his frame from top to toe, straightening him up to a height nearly that of the old man awaiting him. With hatred in his eyes and an evil leer upon his face, but without a word, he fitted the dart held in his left hand into the curved portion of the stick he carried in his right. Then, with a movement of his wrist and arm so rapid that the eye could not follow it, the shaft flew with incredible speed and force toward its living mark.

The aim was so true, the distance so short and the lance's flight so swift, that the spectator who peered from his hiding place beneath the tree roots, had no expectation that Ahmen could escape it. But at the very instant the dart started, he stepped lightly to his right, his left arm shot outward and downward and in the next instant he was holding the weapon, grasped firmly in his hand, harmlessly against his thigh.

Cranton's gasp of horror merged into a sigh of relief, then was immediately changed into a groan of dismay. Ahmen's sidestep had brought him directly in front of one end of the stone of sacrifice. The impetus of the dart which he had so dexterously caught and diverted from its direction had imparted enough of its force to his body to unbalance him and, as he took a step backward to steady himself, his heels tripped upon the stone and threw him full-length backward across its rounded top, his head striking the depressed farther end of it with a crack.

Even as he tottered, his assailant bounded forward, drew from his belt a long, thin knife and in the next instant he was standing above his victim, the keen blade poised in the air, his left hand rapidly exploring Ahmen's chest as if to determine the exact position of the heart before he struck.

It seemed to Cranton as if, in a flash, he had been

transported back a thousand years, unwilling witness of one of the countless human sacrifices held in that forgotten city—and so eager to prevent it that, with a swiftness to match that of the stranger's, he had struggled from his cramped position beneath the *sapote* roots and, naked and unarmed, had catapulted himself at the gloating murderer. The impact of his head against the old man's body sent him hurtling into the undergrowth and left his knife sticking in Cranton's left arm just below the shoulder as he lay prone upon the form of the new-found friend whose life he had attempted to save.

For several seconds he lay stunned and motionless; then, as the pain from his wound increased and brought him back to full consciousness, he became aware of the pulsing heartbeats in the body upon which he lay, and sprang to his feet. With his uninjured arm, he raised the old man to a sitting posture. He came to at once, and his blinking eyes opened wide as they rested upon the knife in Cranton's arm from where the blood flowed down and dripped from his fingers.

He was on his feet in an instant, not even stopping to feel the back of his head where there was already a great lump. Cranton answered the unspoken question in his eyes by pointing to the doubled-up form of the stranger that lay just where it had fallen and had not stirred. It was quite evident that, of its own impulse, it never would.

Cranton perceived with horror that his intervention to prevent a murder had sent another man to his death, and though he had no doubt that it was well deserved; this shock, coupled with the pain from his wound and the jar of the impact of his head against his victim, proved too much—and he knew no more.

CHAPTER II

WHEN Cranton again became conscious, it was to find himself under his own tent, in a hammock, in broad daylight, his arm neatly bandaged, a queer taste in his mouth and Lupe, his personal servant; squatting on the floor beside him.

Seeing him awake, Lupe glided to another hammock in the corner, touched the occupant and tip-toed from the shelter. The next instant Ahmen appeared.

"Buenos dias, paal batab," was his greeting. He grasped Cranton's right hand in a long fervent pressure. Then taking up a cup, he held it to the patient's mouth. The taste convinced Cranton that it was not the first dose of a pungent, but not unpleasant draught, that had been poured down his throat.

He closed his eyes and slept again. When he awoke, a fragrant aroma of chocolate, wafted to him from outside, reminded him that he was very hungry. Then he realized that his arm was dully aching.

He was revived by an excellent breakfast which proved the old wizard to be a camp chef of superexcellence. Then, having finished his tasks, Ahmen came to sit on a stone beside the patient who eagerly awaited his story. But his curiosity was not to be quickly satisfied, for the old man sat for a long time in silent meditation.

Cranton could only do likewise. His adventure was without doubt the most uncanny he had ever experienced and, to intensify its weirdness it had been, from beginning to end, an adventure without words. From his first sight of the grotesque figure jogging down the

trail with his *hulche* and darts, ready for action, to his awakening within his own tent, he had heard no spoken sound.

To this day even, a sense of unreality pervades the whole experience—only the two-inch scar on his arm remaining as a silent witness of the silent drama.

"Paal batab"—the gently spoken words brought him to attention from his puzzled thoughts—"I am a man of few words and fewer friends, and now—through your bravery—without an enemy. We finished a certain fight, rather, you finished it for me—took the revenge I had held in my heart from the day I received a foul blow in a fair fight. You have shown yourself to be my friend by saving my life at the risk of your own. You have placed upon me the greatest debt that a man can owe another. It is a debt that can be paid in only one way—in friendship—and few have I called friends. In giving my friendship to you, I pay that debt. For what one friend does for another he does as a privilege. It is so you showed yourself my friend, and it is so I would show myself your friend until I am called by the gods of the Mayas."

Cranton gave him his hand and held his while he said, "I accept your friendship as a privilege and an honor. I like your way of looking at it and expressing it. It's a man's way."

"It is the way of my fathers, the Mayas," he answered simply.

There was a pause of a few moments which the solemnity of the occasion seemed to demand. Cranton recognized that it was an important one to Ahmen; and what importance it held for him he had no means of judging. He could see that the old man meant all that he had said, and more. He valued this friendship even

if it seemed improbable that he would ever have further need to call upon it. But his curiosity prompted him to break the silence.

"Tell me—what has been going on since I passed out after I was wounded? Why all the silence and secrecy? What did you do with the old codger I knocked out? Why did he want to kill you? Why did neither of you say anything?"

Ahmen smiled benignantly. "You are young, *batab,* and wish to know all things at once. There are so many useful and valuable things to learn, that it is well not to burden the mind with those that can be of no benefit. My old enemy, Ekchan, and I spoke no words because the reason for our hatreds was well known to both of us and was of no concern to others."

"But you told me it concerned a woman," suggested Cranton with a slow smile.

"And by a little trick, you would know the depth of my meaning?" with a keen glance from beneath his shaggy brows. "Then know that long ago we loved the same maid."

"And you won her! And he had never forgiven you."

"Not so, *paal batab.* In that case, his anger would have been brief. He won and married her," sardonically.

"But you expected him, knew his errand and waited unarmed to meet him? Why was that?"

"It was not revealed that I should die, or that the blood of either of us should be shed."

"But my blood was shed—and gladly," Cranton made haste to add. "Did your *zaztun* not tell you that?"

The glance he gave the younger man was partly troubled, partly quizzical. "You will miss nothing in

your searchings. Your question shows me that those who think themselves most wise may at times be the most foolish. I did not seek you in my *zaztun* because I believed I was clever enough to get rid of you. I was; but not so clever that I foresaw how quickly your curiosity would bring you back."

While speaking, he had taken from his henequen bag a small roll of cloth and, unwinding layer upon layer of it, came at last to three packages—one large and two small ones—each wrapped in a square of the same material. Unfolding the largest, he brought to sight an antique Maya knife. The blade, long and thin and sharp, was of obsidian; the haft was of gold, exquisitely wrought in the form of double-entwined serpents, their fangs grasping the blade—a specimen of the highest type of ancient Maya craftsmanship. Cranton experienced a responsive twinge in his arm as he took the weapon in his hand to examine it more closely.

"A knife of sacrifice!" he exclaimed.

"Even so, *paal batab,* taken from the body of its last victim."

"Where do you suppose the old fellow dug it up?"

"*Quien sabe?* Perhaps it was never buried," Ahmen suggested cryptically. Asked what he implied, he only shrugged his shoulders and said, "He might have picked it up somewhere."

"So did you," Cranton retorted. "You keep it."

Ahmen frowned. "One does not give a knife to a friend."

"But you gave it to me."

"Nay. Another gave it to you and in no friendly manner. I only returned it to its owner."

"You think it unlucky to give a knife as a present?"

"It brought misfortune to you."

"That's as you look at it. It brought me your friendship."

"Well said, *batab*. And in token of that, I wish to make you a present of a good omen. At least, I have been told it was so considered in ancient days." He unfolded one of the small squares of cloth, revealing a gold ring of odd and artistic design. It was shaped like a signet ring, but with the bezel at the side instead of at the top. On it was engraved a coiled serpent. It was evidently made to be worn on the forefinger, as upon any other the bezel would be hidden by the next digit.

"It is a rare and beautiful antique," said Cranton, "and must be of great value. I, at any rate shall value it highly. I wish I had something as valuable to give to you."

"It is worth more than this trifle to me to be alive and enjoying your company today," graciously, "yet the ring is believed to have magic powers. The legend is that whoever receives it as a gift will obtain that which he most desires at the moment it is given to him, provided he does not part with it before his wish comes true. I am sure that whatever you most wish for today is worth desiring, and it is my wish that its fulfillment may bring you happiness."

Cranton did not tell him that what he most desired above everything else in the world was to win the love of the girl to whom he had lost his heart in Merida, six months before—Dolores Cocom, the elder of the two daughters of his good friend in that city.

"Well, part of my wish it to get back to Merida a lot faster than I've been traveling with those stubborn mules. Now this arm will slow me up still more, unless my lucky ring gets down to business. But, hold on, my

good friend, if this ring will do all you say it will—"

"That it is said it will," Ahmen corrected him.

"Well, even so, it's not fair to take it from you. Haven't you a wish—?"

"I had a wish—an evil wish—when this ring was given to me. But the gift was precious to me for other reasons, and so I cherished it, and forgot my wish, and forgave my enemy. Yesterday you made that forgotten wish come true; and then after many years, I remembered it. So the ring rightfully passes to you, who are brave and generous, whose aims are worthy."

"But you said you cherished it for other reasons."

"Because it came from a loved friend who passed out of my life long since. Like him, it is now my pleasure to give it to a friend of mine who has long to live."

His scruples overcome, Cranton accepted the ring, about which they had talked as if it actually possessed all the virtues ascribed to it. Although Ahmen had been careful not to affirm his belief in the talismanic properties of the ring, the recipient could not escape the impression that he regarded it more seriously than he was ready to admit. Cranton, himself, was amused to find that in some degree he responded to the old man's serious view of it, and vaguely wondered if it were possible that his possession of it would aid him in winning the favor of Dolores. He was in no mood to neglect any aid, natural or supernatural, which would promote his suit.

For, even to himself, it seemed utterly presumptuous for him to aspire to the hand of a daughter of the man who virtually controlled the sisal industry of Yucatan, and was known throughout the commercial world as the "henequen king."

"Ahmen," he called suddenly. "I'm feeling pretty

fit. Don't you think we could stroll along toward Merida? I'm in a big hurry to get there. It's now the fourteenth, and my passage home is booked for the last of the month. I have some ideas on which I'd like to get Pedro Cocom's opinions before I sail, and—"

"Then it's better for you to take your time and not put your health in danger by wasting your strength," he was interrupted. "The *Señor* Cocom went to Havana last month and will not return until the twenty-seventh. The two *señoritas* went with him."

"The devil, you say!" groaned the incredulous youth. "Did you get that information from your *zaztun* or by telegraph?"

"By neither, *batab*. It was printed in the newspapers of Merida. I read it three weeks ago."

"Humph," he grunted. "Then I guess I'll take a nap."

That night began the journey northward, the wounded man carried in a litter of twisted vines swung between two poles borne by two horses. After three days, he was able to ride horseback and arrived in Peto on the twentieth, paid off the boys, sold the mules and took the train to Merida.

Ahmen had left him on the nineteenth, having assured himself and his young friend that his wound was almost healed. There were no farewells. They talked together in the evening—and in the morning he was gone! A characteristic departure, but Cranton was sorry to lose him. Not only was he a man of great resource, an expert in woodcraft, and able to contrive from material at hand everything necessary to meet any emergency, but he was a most interesting and entertaining companion.

In describing himself as a man of few words, he had

been only partly accurate, for when it pleased him to talk, he could be voluble and informative; but when it served his purpose, he could dismiss a subject as adroitly as a politician. Cranton had noted that Lupe and the other boys treated him, although a full-blooded Maya like themselves, with no less respect than they accorded their American leader.

He mystified and interested Cranton. Was it by accident or design that the old wizard had been sitting upon the stone of sacrifice while he explored the surrounding forest? Had he foreseen or arranged the meeting with his old enemy? Who and what was this weird Ekchan, anyway? From where had he come? Yes; and where had he gone? How had Ahmen disposed of the body of the man Cranton had so unexpectedly killed? Was it merely by coincidence that he, so strangely encountered in the jungle, had brought him the latest news of the girl he loved?

There had been an unexpected sequel to that news. When Thomas had awakened from a long natural sleep on the afternoon of the day on which Ahmen had given him that information concerning the Cocoms, the seer had been sitting just where he had been when the patient dozed off. He had scarcely opened his eyes when Ahmen said, as if the conversation had not been interrupted:

"The newspaper was wrong in one way, *batab*. One of the *señoritas* did not go with her father to Havana."

Cranton sat up, wide awake. "Which one?" he demanded, slipping one leg out of his hammock.

"The *Señorita* Lolita."

"Oh, the little one!" he drew in his leg and sank back—then sat up again. "How do you know it was

she? How did you know anything about it? Who told you?"

"No one told me, *paal batab,* I saw her in the patio, sitting under the wisteria vine near the fountain of the serpents. She was moving squares of wood about in a box."

"What's that?" sharply.

"Even as I said. There was one square less than enough to fill the box, and she was moving first one square into the vacant place, and then another into that space, and so on."

"All right, I believe you," he admitted. He had given Lolita such a puzzle a few days before he left Merida. But how did Ahmen know about it? Or that she was at home now, playing with it? His *zaztun?* He gave it up. The seer was wrong about the fountain, anyway. There was, of course, a fountain, as in the patio of every house in Merida to which he had been admitted; but it was of Moorish design. There was nothing serpentine about it.

Lolita was a delightful child of about fourteen years, as dark as her sister was fair. She had an alert and inquiring mind and the young American had found her very companionable when Dolores was not about. She had been much pleased with the puzzle and had solved it in a few minutes. It seemed unlikely that she could still be interested in it.

Ahmen and his *zaztun!* He wondered how much of what he saw, or professed to see, in it was genuine, how much imagination, how much fakery. This time, at least, there would be an opportunity to check up on his information.

CHAPTER III

CRANTON'S first errand in Merida, after settling himself at the Grand Hotel, was to his banker. His next, to the house of Pedro Cocom. He had found a letter from him, regretting that he would be away when Cranton returned to the city, but expressing a hope to see him before he sailed. He urged him to make free use of his library, where were many volumes and records that he knew were of special interest to the young explorer and that he had not had time to examine while in Merida before. Lolita and Maria, he said, would welcome him. He had expected to take both girls with him to Havana, but Lolita had begged to remain at home so as not to interrupt her studies. Score one for Ahmen!

Cranton was greeted at the door by Maria, a Maya housekeeper, who had assumed the care of the children upon the death of their mother, and who ruled the household. There was also a *Señora* Martinez, a widowed aunt, who lived in the house and was the official duenna of the *señoritas;* but she usually hovered inconspicuously in the background except upon occasions when men were being entertained and the daughters of the house were permitted to be present.

The *Señora,* Maria informed Cranton, had accompanied the *Señorita* Dolores to Havana, but the *Señorita* Lolita was at home and would be pleased to see him in the afternoon when she would be free from her studies.

Thomas Cranton could only wonder at the favor he had met with from Pedro Cocom and his family. Eager

to fit himself for his appointment as an assistant archaeologist, he had spent four months in Mexico City studying the Maya collections in the national museum, and had then gone to Merida for two months' research of the ancient documents gathered there. He had learned that some of the rarest and most valuable were in the library of Pedro Cocom; and friends had provided him with letters of introduction. He had been received with enthusiasm, and within a week had been accepted as a familiar friend.

Yet, all that he had to recommend him so far as he could see, was his own enthusiasm for his chosen work. His interest in the ancient Mayas had been aroused in his freshman year at college by the reading of two volumes by John Loring Stephens, describing his discovery and explorations of many ruined cities in the 1840's.

What had especially excited a hope of succeeding where others had failed, was a suggestion by Stephens that there might possibly exist in the largely unexplored southern regions of the peninsula, one or more of the ancient cities still inhabited by the descendants of its founders, in which the ancient rites and ceremonies were still practiced, the olden customs and ways of living followed, and where the still undeciphered records engraven on its monuments could be read and interpreted by its citizens.

The income from a small inheritance had sufficed to take Cranton through college and had enabled him to offer his services as a volunteer assistant to the chief of an expedition sponsored by a prominent university. He might possibly be carried on the pay roll next time, but it was a long look ahead to an income from his chosen profession that would enable him to support a

wife in even ordinary comfort, to say nothing of the luxury to which Dolores was accustomed. But he was in love; and such considerations were of secondary importance in his thoughts.

Having thoroughly saturated himself with the accounts of what others had done—and had been unable to do—it became his one ambition to uncover some of those ruined cities, and to secure all the information possible about the origin and history, the customs and manners of those who had built them.

It seemed to Cranton that the only way to solve these mysteries would be to find a city still inhabited as in ancient times. The idea, when he broached it to archaeologists, was treated as too fanciful; but he always consoled himself with the thought that they were probably harboring the same hope in secret, and wished to discourage the entry of another rival into the field.

The disruption of the great empire of Mayapan had begun a hundred years before the Spaniards arrived, with the destruction of its capital city, Mayapan, and was hastened by dissensions and wars that ensued between its disintegrated units. At that time the empire had long been governed by the imperial house of Cocom.

So, when Thomas learned that Pedro Cocom was a lineal descendant of the rulers of that vanished empire, he felt that in him he might find a sympathetic supporter of his project. But when he proposed it to him, Cocom smiled and shook his head.

He admitted that there were wide tracts of land to the south that no white man had ever penetrated; but he doubted that anywhere within the region any remnants of the ancient civilization existed.

Pedro Cocom's thousands of acres planted to the

agave rigida, or henequen, from the fibers of which are manufactured the vast quantities of sisal-hemp cordage used for rope, ships' cables and binding twine throughout the world, brought him immense wealth, and he delighted to spend it in a generous hospitality; but he was too shrewd a man of business to use any of it in the pursuit of what he regarded as the chimera of a youthful dreamer. Yet he was willing to devote hours of his time to going over old manuscripts with Cranton, to teaching him the Maya language, and to explaining what he knew—and it was much—about the things the youth longed to learn.

Cranton was consoled that he had this cultured man's friendship, even if he lacked his business confidence. It was easy for him to understand why the older man withheld this from one who lacked the experience to justify it. So he became the more determined to gain, by his own efforts, a place in his profession which would justify Cocom's regard for him as a son-in-law.

Dolores Cocom had not only filled his eye upon his first sight of her, she had filled his heart. Her fair beauty was so totally unexpected in that Spanish-American land that he was astounded by it. And though he later discovered that fair hair and blue eyes were not so uncommon there as he had supposed, he had never seen beauty to equal hers.

Girls mature early in that gentle, equable southern climate, and it was difficult for him to believe that Dolores, with her sophisticated manner, her brilliant conversation and her natural coquetry, was only sixteen and still under the instruction of tutors and governesses. So carefully guarded from possible—and impossible—suitors, as are all well-born maidens in Span-

ish-America, he wondered how she had achieved her air of worldly confidence.

In the two months that he had had the freedom of the house, he had encountered no other young men in it. So he could only conclude—to his own chagrin—that her father merely regarded him as a big boy, oddly interested in his own pet hobby and not a man likely to be even more interested in a beautiful and attractive woman.

Besides, he had observed that *Señor* Cocom's attitude toward foreigners, especially English-speaking ones, was quite different from that toward the younger men of Merida. The latter were seldom admitted to his presence, while visitors from abroad were warmly welcomed. If they were younger men, they saw little of the girls; but he appeared to encourage his daughters' meeting the many older and often distinguished men who came as old friends or with letters of introduction.

Thomas had no way of knowing if Dolores had more than a friendly interest in him or if she merely used him as a convenient subject on which to practice her feminine wiles. Usually when others were present —and he seldom saw her at other times—she was either very formal or delightfully companionable, depending upon the others present. But occasionally, when chance had brought them together for a few moments alone, she had given him a glance or a smile that, whether it meant much or nothing, had set his head in a whirl and his heart in a turmoil.

He had always felt more at ease with little Lolita, whose personality had no such disturbing influence on him. When he arrived on the afternoon of his return to Merida, she met him with a joyous *"Tomasito!"* the

childish diminutive with which she had endeavored to ignore the twelve-inch difference in their heights.

"Come," she cried, taking his hand and dragging him into the garden, "see our new fountain! Isn't it beautiful?"

It was indeed a fine work of art—of modern construction, but in the best period of Maya sculpture. The design was that of a group of entwined serpents, their upraised heads spouting jets of water into the surrounding pool, their sinuous bodies crossing its floor and gracefully emerging to form, with their many-rattled tails, the encircling balustrade. The surface of the wall supporting this balustrade was covered with Mayan hieroglyphs carved in intaglio.

Thomas gazed at it with admiration and amazement. It was surely the fountain which tallied with Ahmen's description, "the fountain of the serpents." Score two for him! Of course, Thomas reflected, he may have read about this, too, in the newspaper. It could scarcely have escaped mention. When he had admired it to the extent of all the adjectives in his Spanish vocabulary, he asked, "But where did you father get the unique idea?"

"About two years ago, papa engaged two celebrated sculptors to come all the way from Barcelona, Spain, to build a Maya fountain, patterned after an ancient one found in the ruined city of Mayapan. They've been working on it ever since. Just after you went away, it was finished and put up under their direction."

Again, Thomas voiced his admiration of the original design and the skill of the modern artists who had reproduced it.

"Do you sit here often?" he asked.

"Why, yes; almost every afternoon. Shouldn't you?"

"Of course." Especially if Dolores were there also, he thought, then to Lolita: "I suppose you discarded long ago, the game I brought you."

To his surprise, she looked down and turned her head away, and he could see the rims of her ears grow pink. But the next moment, she was laughing up at him in her frank, merry way. Her dark eyes shone with amusement.

"Yes, I did. I mean, I put it away. It was too easy. Then, about a week ago when your chief called for the purpose of saying goodbye to *Papacito,* it reminded me that you would soon be coming back. I got out the puzzle, but it wasn't much fun, so I tried to make a new game of it by pasting different letters on the little squares. But as I knew what the letters spelled, it wasn't very interesting, so I put it away, again."

"What did they spell?" he asked idly.

"Don't you wish you knew?" she laughed, as she rose abruptly and went into the house. It looked to Thomas as if Ahmen had scored a third count, which in no way helped him to solve the mystery of his new friend.

He followed Lolita into the house and into her father's library, where their conversation led to his recent expedition. It was a real pleasure and satisfaction to talk with Lolita about his work. She was insatiable in her eagerness to hear all about what he had done, seemed interested in every detail of his unexciting research.

There was a candid directness and sincerity about Lolita which added charm to her striking brunette beauty. But the fair loveliness of Dolores so filled Thomas' memory that Lolita served only to pass the

time until her sister's return, which he awaited with impatience.

Yet, when she came, he caught only a glimpse of her; but in that glimpse he caught also her swift and tantalizing smile of greeting which set his heart to pounding in his throat and left him speechless. She was whisked away by *Señora* Martinez while *Señor* Cocom was shaking his hands, patting him on the back, and throwing his arm about his shoulders, acting much as if he were a long-lost brother—or even son.

He, too, wished to hear all about the explorer's adventures; so he had to relate them over again—as he had told them to Lolita.

"Fine! Fine!" he exclaimed when Thomas told him of the ruined city he had stumbled upon. "You must write an account of it. You are only a—what you Americans call it—a kid. But never mind, you'll soon be a goat," he laughed, "with whiskers and spectacles, rushing around the world, giving illustrated lectures and making lots of money."

"I hope not!" Thomas exclaimed with dismay.

"Yes, that's the only way to—what you call it—'cash in' as an antiquarian—whiskers, spectacles, a few books, many lectures. Then you can be independent, marry, raise a family and have the pleasure of commanding your own expeditions."

"Not for a long time, I fear. I'm only a beginner, and I shall have to work under orders for some time longer before I can do as I wish—if that day ever comes."

"True! True! I forget," acceded Cocom, "but you seem so experienced and you are so enthusiastic that it is hard to remember."

"Well," Cranton declared, "exploring has its fascin-

ations, but it's not all fun. There is plenty of discomfort, yet I'm mighty sorry I have to leave it right now. I'm sailing the day after tomorrow." His face was sober.

"So soon? What a pity! Then you must dine with us tomorrow for bon voyage. But you'll return again. When? I'll answer my own question. In a few months at most. Yucatan will call you and you will come quickly."

"I hope so." And his silent thought was, "Substitute 'Dolores' for 'Yucatan' and I'll come on the minute."

It was not until just before dinner on the following evening that Cranton had an opportunity to speak to Dolores alone, and then, only for a few moments. He had arrived early for a final hour of reading in *Señor* Cocom's library, and was so deeply engrossed in a ponderous volume—the contents of which had projected his mind into the past some thousand years—that he was not aware of another's presence in the room until a soft voice brought him abruptly back to the present, and as suddenly to his feet.

"Oh, *Señor* Cranton, you frightened me! I did not know you were here."

"Your pardon, *Señorita,*" he begged as, with an awkward movement of his hand, he endeavored to smooth his unruly thatch of auburn hair in which it was his habit to twine his fingers when he became absorbed in reading. He flushed, and his discomfort increased as he beheld the exquisite beauty of Dolores, even more desirable than when he had last seen her.

With a smile, half shy, half challenging, she declared, "But I like to see you with your hair all tumbled. So like a big boy you look then, instead of the distinguished scholar."

"It matters not *how* you like to see me, but that you do," he ventured boldly, taking an uncertain step toward her, while his eyes questioned hers.

She turned from his gaze and crossed the room to a divan. "Papa tells me you are sailing to the States tomorrow. Shall you return soon?"

"Just as soon as possible," emphatically. "Within a few months at most. If I had my way, I should not leave."

"My father will miss you. He had planned for your remaining in Merida for some time on your return from the jungles. He has much to talk over with you and will welcome you back."

"And you?"

"Of course. You are the best of our American friends."

"Your friendship has been very precious to me and I hope that when I come again," he began formally, then, "—ah, *Señorita* Dolores—what's the use of my trying to conceal the fact that I love you," he finished helplessly, as her eyes shone upon him in open adoration. But at his words, she glanced toward the door in alarm.

"I should not be here with you and you should not speak to me so. I must go." A wistful smile softened her admonition.

"But I know that I shall probably have no other opportunity to speak with you alone, so I shall say goodbye now."

"Don't say goodbye. You will return soon. I shall say but *'hasta mañana.'* "

He took her hand in both his own and kissed it fervently. "I repeat your farewell, *'hasta mañana'*—in

English, 'until tomorrow'—and may 'tomorrow' not be too many days."

"I shall be waiting," she whispered, and was gone.

Cranton experienced a momentary sense of guilt for what had taken place for he knew that his privileges in the Yucatecan's home had been most unusual. He consoled himself, however, with the thought that on his return he would make a formal request for her hand, from her father.

Believing it would be quite unlikely that he would have an opportunity to say anything to Dolores which would not be overheard, he had come prepared to leave with her some token of his affection which would not be misunderstood by her, and yet that would meet with no objection from her father. He had not been prepared for their meeting in the library and she had gone before he remembered the gift he had brought for her.

He flattered himself that he had been rather adroit in forming his plans, so when they had retired to the library after dinner and were discussing his departure, he ventured:

"*Señor* Cocom, you can never know just how much your friendship and hospitality have meant to me. I can't tell you; but I wish to express my appreciation in some small degree." He was conscious that his words were formal and stilted, which embarrassed him the more, but he plunged ahead in an effort to reach the end: "I hope that you and the *Señora* and the *Señoritas* will accept these somewhat interesting souvenirs of my adventures in your country to help you to keep me pleasantly in mind until I come again."

As he finished, he drew a parcel from his pocket, which contained the knife of sacrifice, something which he knew that Pedro Cocom would appreciate; a quaint

golden image which he hoped would please the *Señora;* a jade plaque for Lolita and, for Dolores, the magic wish-ring he had received from Ahmen.

In making the last choice, he had obeyed an impulse that he had been unable to resist. The significance of a ring as his gift to Dolores would not, he hoped, escape her, and it was the kind of ring which, given openly in this way, would convey nothing to others, and to its recipient whatever sentiment she chose to associate with it. Now, more than ever, since their tete-a-tete before dinner, he was convinced that she would receive the ring with the same sentiment with which it was given.

As he spread his curios on the table, without indicating which was intended for whom, four pairs of eyes scrutinized them with admiration, then turned in question to him.

"These," he said, indicating the knife and the ring, "I received as tokens of friendship from a stranger to whom I was able to render a service. I don't know where he got them or how old they are, but the giver told me that the knife came from an enemy, and the ring from a friend. The image and the jade plaque I found by diving to the bottom of a *cenote* in the unnamed city I happened upon. I hope," he added, looking at his host, "that you will not consider the gift of a knife as ill-omened, since it is offered as an antique and comes from a friend."

Before *Señor* Cocom could reply, Dolores had it in her hand.

"He might," she said, "but not I. Besides, he has no use for it and already has one like it—only not so beautiful. He said it would be bad luck to give it to me when I asked for it. See!" she thrust the thin gold

sheathed blade down into the golden coils of her hair, where the delicately wrought hilt gleamed and blinked defiance at Cranton's astonishment. "But it's not bad luck to give a *señorita* a hair ornament, is it?"

"It pleases me to have you want anything I can bring you," he said quickly, for there could be no doubt that as Dolores wore it, rising above her head like a high Spanish comb, matching the golden yellow of her hair which resembled the fibers of her father's henequen drying in the sun, it was strikingly ornamental. He thought that no other woman could have worn it so effectively. The pleasure of giving her something which so evidently delighted her, counter-balanced his disappointment over not being able to give her the ring.

Her father smiled indulgently, the *señora* frowned, and Lolita shrugged her silent disapproval; while Dolores sat back with the triumphant air of one accustomed to have her own way.

Dolores' choice had disarranged the plans for the distribution of the gifts, so in his attempt to re-allocate them quickly, he surprised himself by presenting the jade plaque to the *señora,* which seemed to please her; and the golden image from the *cenote,* which was the more intrinsically valuable of the two remaining articles, to Cocom. He held out the ring to Lolita.

"This does not seem to be a very appropriate gift for a *señorita,*" he apologized. "It is too large for your forefinger, or even for your thumb. But don't disdain it. It is a magic ring. Whatever you most wish for now —at this moment when I give it to you—will be granted to you, if you still have the ring when it is time for the wish to come true. So—wait a minute—think wisely—something worthwhile, before you take it," he commanded with mock solemnity.

He paused. "Have you made your wish? You are sure you know what you want?" He held the ring above her head.

"Of course," she replied gravely. "I didn't need to decide. I already knew. Please put it on!" and she held out the third finger of her left hand while he laughingly obeyed her.

Dolores gave her a sharp, suspicious look from her half-closed eyes. "Of what use is a ring which you can't even wear?" she wanted to know.

"Why! to make my wish come true!" Lolita declared, as if her faith in its magic properties were unquestionable.

CHAPTER IV

AS Thomas Cranton boarded the train at the port of Progresso, which was to take him back to Merida, it seemed to him almost incredible that three years had sped by since he left Yucatan with high hopes and ardent promises of an early return.

Almost immediately after he had reported in New York, he had been offered a salaried appointment on the staff of an archaeological expedition to Egypt. The opportunity thus offered for comparing the ancient African civilization with that of Yucatan was one that he could ill afford to miss. Besides, the engagement was for only six months—which lengthened into a year, then into another, and a third.

Fortunately, he had heard from the *señoritas* indirectly through their father's letters; several times a year he had written to the *señor* accounts of his work, which he hoped would be passed on to the girls—especially when he mentioned his eagerness to return to Yucatan and devote his life to a study of the Mayas.

He had left the country, a boyish underling. He now returned, an experienced leader, with self-confidence and initiative. He resolved to find out at once how he stood with Dolores, if he had to break down every social convention of Merida.

At least, he knew that she was still unmarried; though to be nineteen, beautiful, an heiress—and free, was a combination difficult to imagine in that city.

Taking time only for a hasty dinner at the hotel, he hurried to the home of his friend, to learn, with disappointment, that he was not at home. But the faithful

and friendly Maria was and, recognizing his voice, she came to his rescue with a hearty greeting. He must come in, of course. *Señor* Cocom would never forgive her if she allowed Cranton to go away before he returned in, oh! perhaps a few minutes—half an hour at the most. The *señora,* alas! was ill with a headache, but the *señoritas* were at home and would rejoice to see him.

"Would the *Señora* Martinez approve my seeing them?"

"The *señora?* You should know! An old friend like you, who knew the *señoritas* when they were but children! You will find one of them in the garden, and I shall call the other," and she disappeared as she waved him into the patio.

Surely, luck was with him! For in the shadow of the wall behind the fountain, the girl who had filled his thoughts and dreams for three long years, stood with her back toward him. He caught his breath sharply with the joy of the moment and the picture she made in the moonlight which filtered through the branches of the *yax nicte* tree above her, and wove a flickering lacy pattern as delicate as the shimmering lace mantilla which was draped about her head and shoulders. Tall, slender, graceful—. Obeying a sudden impulse, he approached her quietly, took her into his arms and kissed her with an eager abruptness.

He was not surprised at her gasp of astonishment, but when he had released her and turned about to face her, he found that he had held in his arms—Lolita, grown to womanhood. His astonishment was even greater than hers—he was stricken dumb.

For a bewildered moment, her wide, brown eyes questioned him, then, "Why, *Tomasito*—you have

come back!" she exclaimed under her breath. "And—why, you kissed me—" she added, half to herself.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" he wanted to know, endeavoring, with enthusiasm, to conceal the blunder he had made.

"Of course I am," she admitted shyly. "Though I hadn't expected you would be quite so bold; but then, you Americans—always you do the unexpected things which are so—so—" she hesitated, "—delightful."

His embarrassment only increased. He had hoped that she would credit his impulsive welcome to his former friendship with her, when she had been but an interesting and lovely child to him, but she had evidently taken his caress more seriously. He laughed nervously.

"I only arrived late this afternoon and came over as soon as possible after dinner."

"To see—me first. Oh, *Tomasito,* I am so happy to see you again. I thought you were never coming back. We did have such lovely times when you were here."

"You really remembered me so well all this time?"

"Remember you? Why! what a strange question." Then, as if with an effort, she changed the subject. "*Papacito* is away, but he will return early. He, too, will be most happy to see you. Have you seen Dolores? I must call her."

Ah! no, he had not; but that very desire had hastened his arrival there. Suddenly, he was alone; and the next moment Dolores entered the patio, more lovely even than he had remembered her, hands outstretched in greeting to him. "You have returned—at last," she said softly.

He moved to meet her, would have drawn her to him and greeted her as he had Lolita—but something restrained him. Her beauty awed him, her very reality.

He raised their joined hands between them and searched her eyes.

"It has been a long time to me,—Dolores."

She glanced up quickly, at his first venture to address her thus intimately, but without reproach. "Why so long?"

"Because, had I returned sooner, I must soon have gone away again. Now, I hope to do all my work in Yucatan."

"And you would like that?"

"Yes; above everything."

"Why?" she breathed; swaying toward him as if eager for his reply.

Her blue eyes questioned him; her hair, in which gleamed the hilt of the dagger he had given her, shone like a golden halo in the moonlight; three years of longing for this very nearness of her maddened him, sent the blood rushing hotly through his veins; and he crushed her to him almost rudely, seeking her lips with his. Her arms reached up about his neck in response.

"That's why!" he told her breathlessly, as —

"Papacito! Papacito! Tomasito's here," called Lolita's voice, as she held the barred gates ajar for the entrance of her father's automobile. "He's in the patio. Come and see him!"

"Careful," cautioned Dolores. "Papa must not know this. I must go at once," and she disappeared as suddenly as had Lolita, just as Pedro Cocom strode into the patio to overwhelm his guest with welcome; throwing his arms about his shoulders, patting him on the back, holding him off for better inspection, embracing him, until Cranton began to wonder if he were expected to repeat with the father, the scenes he had just enacted with the daughters. It was only the generous Yucatan

manner of expressing his friendship and good will, of his pleasure at seeing him.

The two girls did not join them in the library; their father did not even invite them. It was apparent that he had no intention of sharing the traveler's society with anyone until he had filled in all the gaps in their correspondence and the lapses of his memory.

What pleased him most was to hear of the young American's decision to devote the rest of his life to archaeological research in his beloved country, and of the encouragement for support in the work.

"What, exactly—if it is not a secret—is your present enterprise?" he inquired.

"Nothing very important," admitted the explorer, "or entirely decided. There is still the work we started at Tuluum three years ago to be completed, if nothing more interesting turns up. Some day, I want to uncover the city which I found some distance from there, but it would require a larger force and more money than I can command this year. Of course, what I'm really looking for, and hope some day to find, is a city still inhabited by descendants of the old Mayas, where the ancient customs and ceremonies and records are kept up, and will reveal so much that we want to know, and that we shall probably never be able to discover in any other way."

Pedro shook his head discouragingly. "Still harping on that broken string? It doesn't sound good to me, and it will lose its music for you, my boy, after you've been here a little longer. That city is only an imaginative creation of white men fed by Indian legends of unknown antiquity brought down to present times, a—what you call it—pipe dream. Like the fairy tales of old Ahmen when he has had a little too much to drink."

Thomas pricked up his ears. "Ahmen? Who's Ahmen?"

"Oh, a harmless old Maya Indian who probably knows more about the geography of Yucatan than any other living man. In his active days, he used to be in great demand as a guide for explorers and archaeologists. He has been every place anyone else has ever been on the peninsula, and to many places nobody ever heard of. If there is such a populated city, he'd know about it. And I've heard him drop vague hints of it, but only when he had a—what you call it—little edge. What I'm getting at is this: the fact remains that he has never guided an expedition to it, though it would have brought him great fame, and more money than he could spend in his lifetime, if he lived to be twice as old as he is now—and that must be around ninety. And that, my boy, is—as you would say—the answer!"

Cranton recognized that this Ahmen was his old friend, but felt that it would be well to be cautious in his inquiries. "He must be an interesting old fellow. I'd like to get in touch with him."

"He is, and you probably can. He is unusually well-informed for a man of his class. In fact, he is a pretty good authority on Mayan antiques. Really a man of unusual intelligence. But because he is old, a mystic, and knows more than most other natives—and perhaps because his name is Ahmen—he is generally regarded as a wizard. I doubt if he takes the trouble to dispel the belief where it is held—possibly encourages it; but he makes no pretentions to supernatural powers; even deprecates them, when he's with men like you and me."

"And you say that you know where I can find him?"

"Yes, and no. He has appointed himself a sort of unattached retainer of my household, and the special

guardian of my daughter, Lolita. He professes to regard her as the reincarnation of a former sweetheart of his who, he claims, was also of royal Maya lineage. This is probably because Lolita has taken an interest in him and provided him with a little thatched *casa* somewhere out there." Pedro waved in the direction of the servants' quarters. "It is his home at any time he wants to use it, which isn't a great deal. Whenever he can, he prefers to be in the forest.

"Lolita humors his eccentric and mysterious manner and claims for him and his *zaztun* genuine mystic powers. How much of this she actually believes, I do not know; but Dolores ridicules the old fellow and taunts her sister about her crazy old Indian fortune teller." Pedro stepped to the door and called: "Lolita!"

"Yes, *Papacito!*" and in a moment she appeared.

"Ahmen? Do you know where he is?"

"No, *Papacito*. He has been away for several weeks on one of his mysterious absences. Do you want him?"

"Our friend, *Señor* Cranton, does. He evidently wants to hear some of his fairy tales."

"Oh, then he'll be back, soon."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know so. Because if *Tomasito* wants to see him, I'll want him to come. And he will be here."

"What nonsense is that? Have you fallen completely for his superstitious rigamarole?"

"Why, *Papacito!* it isn't nonsense, and it isn't superstition. It's his *zaztun!*"

"Tell that to your parrot!" Pedro chided her with a chuckle.

Lolita wrinkled her nose childishly. "I do. And Lorro just mumbles something in a strange language and blinks her eyes. But," with a confident smile and

nod, "you'll see! Anything else? Then goodnight," and with a smile for each of them she was gone.

Pedro sat frowning for a moment. "No doubt," he said at last, that those old Maya crystal gazers put over some—what you call it—queer stunts. Beyond me!"

It was near midnight when Cranton took his leave, and when he arrived at the hotel ten minutes later, Ahmen stepped out from the shadows and greeted him.

"I am here, *batab!*"

"I was expecting you," Cranton replied in the same casual manner, though it was with an effort that he concealed his amazement at the wizard's appearance. "Come to my room."

"Let us sit in the park. I am not at home in hotel rooms with their four smothering walls."

Cranton agreed, and selected a stone seat in the park, where Ahmen, at his invitation, sat down beside him. Under the electric light, he appeared to have changed scarcely at all. Perhaps a trifle thinner, a trifle more wrinkled, if that were possible; but his blue eyes were undimmed, that one black lock of hair over his left temple was the same raven's wing amid the white, which had made his appearance so striking three years before.

There was no need for preliminaries with a man of his type, so Cranton went at once to the point.

"There has been much talk of hidden cities in which life continues today as in ancient times. Is it true?"

Ahmen shrugged his shoulders, dodged the question and came back with another which was reasonable, if evasive: "Think you, *paal batab,* that if such an inhabited city existed today, someone would not have dis-

covered it? Explorers, archaeologists, chicle-gatherers or hunters might have found it."

"That may be so, Ahmen. But remember, that not even all of the buried cities have yet been discovered, to say nothing about the possibility of there being inhabited ones as they were a thousand years ago. Why, the great explorer, Stephens, met a priest who saw such a city at a distance over the mountains. I'll admit, if there is such a city," Cranton continued earnestly, "it would indeed be in a place so hidden and difficult to reach that it would surely be worth a man's life to search for it."

After further questioning, he obtained a more direct answer concerning the ruined cities of which Ahmen had formerly hinted.

"Oah, *paal batab,* it is even so. More than one deserted city in the south with temples and lofty pyramids of great beauty have never been visited by white men. You may be the first to explore one of them, if you wish."

"Where is such a deserted city?" asked Cranton with keen interest. "An important one—to which I may go instead of to one from which other explorers have skimmed the cream. I have but one month to find it. If I have not found it in thirty days, I must turn back, and wait at least another year for the dry season. Do you know of such a place?"

Ahmen pondered awhile in silence before he spoke. "Yes, *batab,* I know—just such a place. I know it well. Many years ago did I set out in search of such a city for another explorer like yourself—and found it. But so long was I delayed from returning, that my discovery was never reported to him. Nor to any man. This ruined city have I called Multum, and is many suns

away and difficult to reach; but with good men and good mules and horses, a month would be enough."

"Splendid! You can direct me to it?"

Ahmen shook his head. "Many years have passed since I have returned to it. What I could tell you would be filled with doubt as the morning with the mist, and might be wrong."

"But you could doubtless pick up the trail again yourself?"

"Yes, I think, *batab*."

"And guide me there?"

"If I but had the strength. But now I am old. My health is good and I do not lack in vigor for my years; yet my legs are but withered stalks compared with those of my youth. I must think well upon it before I give an answer. You shall have it in good time, so that you will not be delayed. That is the best I can say for tonight. How soon do you go?"

"As soon as I can find Lupe or some other good man for a leader, and get my men, supplies and equipment together."

Ahmen stood up and raised his right arm. A shadow detached itself from those thrown by the broad leaves of a banana tree; and Lupe stood before them, a wide grin upon his face.

When Cranton had encountered Ahmen outside the hotel, he had resolved not to appear astonished at anything that happened in which the wizard might have a hand; so he now acted as if it were quite natural for Lupe to appear the instant he expressed a wish to see him, and hear him report that he could gather everything needed, and be ready to start on twenty-four hours' notice. Arrangements between them were completed in a few minutes.

Cranton began to suspect that some secret agency was at work in his behalf, about which, or whom, it would be wisest for him not to be too curious.

If it afforded Ahmen any satisfaction—and he knew it did—to act like a mysterious and benevolent genie of the Arabian Nights, he was welcome to it. Lolita too, assumed an air of mystery when Cocom had inquired for Ahmen.

Lolita! What a woman she had become. He recalled how pleasantly she had filled his arms, recalled the words of the unfinished sentence she had spoken before she disappeared to call Dolores. Confound it, why had he made such a blunder? Yet how was he to realize that in his absence she had grown from a child, interested in puzzles and absorbed in her studies, to a woman as charming and beautiful as Dolores, with a difference in her charm which equalled the difference in their types of beauty. And she was even now a year older than Dolores had been upon his former visit!

He must no longer carry on his affair with Dolores clandestinely, he decided. The honorable thing was to declare his intentions to Pedro and court her according to the customs of her country. Her attitude was already most encouraging, and the wisest course for him was to hint to no one that he suspected anyone's interposition in his interest—least of all to Lolita or to Ahmen.

His meditations were suddenly arrested by discovering that he was alone. Ahmen? Where was he? Cranton discovered that he and Lupe must have slipped away quietly, leaving him to his thoughts, and a sudden realization that he would be much more comfortable in bed—much more competent after a good night's rest to decide what next move to make in the somewhat tangled way before him.

CHAPTER V

THE opportune—or opportunely contrived—meeting with Lupe greatly simplified all Cranton's business arrangements, and relieved him of much troublesome detail. As agreed the night before, the Indian boy was at hand early the next morning to take charge of his personal belongings and to accompany him to the various merchants for purchasing the necessary supplies for several months in the jungle.

He had arrived in Merida in the midst of the annual carnival week. Consequently, he met with difficulty in having his supplies sent to the railway station, for the whole city was devoted to the celebration, is seemed. Lupe elected to forego the festivities to accompany the luggage and purchases to Mani, where he proposed to assemble his personnel, buy his mules and organize the expedition for Cranton to join at his convenience.

If Tuluum were to be his destination, there was no need to hasten his departure; but if he were to go in search of Ahmen's indefinitely located Multun, he should start with the least possible delay so as to allow the full month for finding it.

On the other hand, if he found Dolores willing to marry him, and won her father's approval, he would be in no haste to plunge into the wilderness, even to go to Multun.

When he returned to the hotel, the clerk handed him a large square envelope which bore the Cocom coat-of-arms. Wondering, and with eager fingers, he tore it open and found Pedro's invitation to the grand ball

which would be held at his home the following evening. Enclosed with it was a brief but characteristic note from Lolita—written in her usual spirit of camaraderie:

> "Dear *Tomasito:* We have the honor of giving the ball this year. Today, the decorators have turned us out of the house, and Dolores and I regret that we cannot see you as we expected. But you may see us in the parade tomorrow, and surely at the ball in the evening. We're saving dances for you. Lolita."

He had already engaged an automobile in which to join the parade, for he had decided to follow the merrymakers. This parade would be a gay reckless procession of motor cars filled with hilarious young people, driven madly through the streets; some cars filled with girls, other cars with young men, all laughing and shouting, pelting each other with confetti in regular, or irregular, carnival fashion. The girls are armed with coils of paper ribbon with which, retaining one end, they bombard the young men of their choice or favor.

The procession is formed on the spacious avenue Montejo, where each group of boys endeavors to arrange that their car will follow the one in which ride the girls by whom they expect to be favored. Which involves no little danger and excitement.

Alfredo was experienced in the game, knew both of the *señoritas* Cocom by sight and did his best to carry out the desires of his passenger. He halted, with engine running, at the corner of an intersecting street a short distance ahead of where the first of the procession was forming.

"Why do you stop here?" asked Cranton.

"You will soon see, *Señor.* As more and more cars come to join the parade, they will move forward, and I shall show you a plan that will please you when the time comes."

As he had predicted, the line gradually moved toward them and finally, with a sudden shout, he threw in his clutch and was off, with a jerk that nearly hurled his passenger over the back of the car. Just then, another car—a handsome roadster, driven by a stout man in evening clothes and accompanied by a younger man in military uniform—going at full speed, swept up beside them, aiming for the same space in the procession. Although the other car was moving faster than his, Alfredo had the advantage of being on the outside of the curve and by continuing the curve until he was parallel with the procession, he forced the rival car toward the curb and its driver to jam on his brakes—a perilous maneuver, but one that enabled Alfredo, by a swift change of direction, to slide into the coveted place.

Cranton now observed that the Cocom sisters rode in the car in front of them, standing in the tonneau, cheering and clapping their hands, swaying about and holding onto each other to avoid being thrown out.

As he swung into position, Alfredo turned a grinning face to Cranton and shouted over his shoulder, "I guess that's pretty quick work for separating lovers, *Señor!*"

But Cranton was by now quite as excited as the native participants and was standing himself, his hands raised to catch the ribbon streamer which Dolores aimed at him. Lolita, too, was smiling and gesturing to him, and just then climbed upon the seat to toss her ball. It sped toward him—but high, too high for him to reach, and the streamer passed over his head. He heard shouts of triumph and derisive laughter from behind.

Turning, he saw the other end of the ribbon held by the young Yucateco in uniform, who smiled and waved his hand at the American. Cranton acknowledged his gesture with equal courtesy and turned about quickly to face Dolores who, with flushed face and more animation than Thomas had ever seen her display, sprang onto the seat and hurled her ball in his direction. It, too, was aimed high, but Cranton had no intention of allowing her streamer to fall into another's hands; and springing off his feet—a dangerous act in the moving car—he grasped the ribbon beyond the end as it unfurled. Turning about, he saw that the end had settled over the windshield of the roadster and its driver had applied his brakes, regardless of the safety of the cars which followed him, to reach for the streamer, which eluded his grasp as Cranton pulled it in, hand over hand.

Protesting honks and frightened screams sounded from the cars in the rear and policemen hurried toward the roadster with shouted warnings, upraised hands and shrill blasts of whistles.

Alfredo had slowed up, and now, at a word from his passenger, moved over to the sidewalk. Cranton waved the ribbon exultantly above his head and endeavored to meet Dolores' eye; instead, he caught a pernicious look from the man in the roadster, whose face was almost black with anger and chagrin, at the failure of his attempt to interfere between Dolores and his rival.

But the American was pleased with himself and the evening's exciting adventure, as he leisurely alighted and paid his obliging chauffeur. Alfredo slipped the money into his pocket, eyed the young American with wonder and his farewell as he drove away was:

"Good luck to you, *Señor*. You're the bravest man I know!"

Cranton was too excited and elated to attach any special significance to his words, concluding that he referred to his lack of fear during the whole of the dangerous episode. He strolled through the hilarious throngs toward the home of Pedro Cocom, hoping to claim the first dance with Dolores.

As he arrived at the home of his old friend, the grand march was already forming, with the daughters of the house leading. Lolita was accompanied by the young lieutenant, and Dolores—by the stout fellow whose enmity Cranton had incurred. "Very good," thought Cranton, "he may have her for the grand march, but I shall have the first dance."

Which he promptly proceeded to accomplish, the march ended. Dolores glanced at him nervously as he approached, with determination gleaming in his eyes.

"You will grant me the favor of the first dance, *Señorita?*" he bowed.

"I should be delighted, *Señor* Cranton, but—" she demurred, fingering her gorgeous feather fan, opening, then closing it.

"But why? You have had the grand march with your new admirer. This is mine! Who has a better right?" Just then the music started. Cranton saw his rival approaching through a door across the room, and as he had no intention of yielding Dolores to him or any desire to get into a dispute with him, he slipped his arm about her waist and whirled her out upon the floor.

She gasped with dismay as she fell into step with him and he felt her tremble; looking down, he saw that her face was pale and anxious. At the same time, he sensed a current of restraint in the room and realized that

they were alone upon the floor, that even Lolita and her partner had hesitated to follow them. All eyes were turned toward them with surprise and expectancy, then shifted toward the doorway from where the defeated admirer glowered at them. Presently, he disappeared, and the room filled up as if by magic. Dolores had been rigidly silent; but now she relaxed as they were lost in the whirling assembly, and he yielded to her gentle guiding toward the side of the room that opened on the patio.

"Quick!" she whispered, "quick! into the garden," and he again found himself alone with her under the stars. The wisteria bower offered a secluded retreat and he drew her into its semi-darkness.

"Of what are you afraid—that big fellow who nearly smashed me up in the parade tonight?" he asked solicitously.

"Perhaps—a little."

He laughed. "You might well have feared him—then. He's a bad actor with a car. They should take away his license. But you'll always be safe with me, dear, from him or any danger. If you say so, I'll smash him up so thoroughly that he will never bother you again. Who is he?" His arm had slipped protectingly about her and he drew her gently toward him. She did not resist, and his heart pounded violently. Without answering his question, she placed both her hands upon his arm and looked up into his face with tremulous appeal.

"Oh, *Señor Tomas,* I fear I have led you into great trouble. I have done a dreadful thing. Ah! but you must not blame me! It is only that I have let myself be swayed by my emotions, rather than by my sense of duty and the stupid social conventions." She gripped

his arm tensely. "Say you will forgive me," she pleaded.

"Of course I forgive you. Only tell me that you love me, and I'll forgive you anything."

As he bent as if to kiss her, and she averted her face to prevent him, a step sounded on the gravel path and an angry voice accosted them.

Cranton released his hold upon Dolores, who had pressed her hands against his chest and thrust him from her so forcibly that he took an uncertain step backward. She then turned to the intruder and threw her arms about him with a gasp, "Manuel!"

It was the big fellow of whom they had just spoken. His face flamed with rage and his manner was threatening, but he was hindered from further action by Dolores' hold upon him, while she seemed to be urging him to calm himself with words that Cranton could not hear. The stranger exerted some control over his voice, which was still tense with hatred, and exclaimed:

"*Señor,* you shall give me satisfaction for this!"

"And why?" countered Thomas, calmly.

"Bah! you knew well enough. No man can force his attentions on my fiancée and not account to me! Not only that, you intercept in the parade the ribbon she throws to me and claim the dance that belongs to me by right and her desire. You have made me and my future wife ridiculous before the whole city. There is only one way in which such insults can be settled."

"Why, man!" cried the astonished American, "you don't mean to tell me that you and *Señorita* Dolores are engaged! I can't—I don't believe it!"

"Hah! you next tell me I lie! Another insult. As if you did not know what is known to all."

Cranton turned to Dolores, his voice pleading for

her denial. "Tell me! is it true what this man says—that you are betrothed to him?"

With a look of innocent surprise which he could not decide whether genuine or well feigned, she replied, "You did not know? You who have known us so long —that both Lolita and I have been affianced since long before we knew you?"

Feeling quite as if the bottom had dropped from the whole world beneath him, puzzled and grieved, he wanted to tell her that, for engaged girls, both of them had behaved somewhat peculiarly toward him. Instead, he protested:

"No; I had not heard. I did not know. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? You will be sorry!" Manuel disengaged himself from Dolores' embrace and advanced toward him as the lieutenant, who had appeared behind them with Lolita, placed a restraining hand on his arm and cautioned:

"Not here, Sanchez! And not so loud. Have regard for the *señoritas*. There must be no cause for gossip tonight in this house."

Sanchez—Manuel Sanchez! Now Cranton knew who the larger man was. The son and junior partner of a banker whose wealth doubtless equalled, if it did not surpass, that of Pedro Cocom. Not that it mattered to Cranton who or how rich he was, but he now knew whom he was opposing. Sanchez continued:

"Bah! Let me thrash him, Perez! Trying to escape me by pleading ignorance of what no one is ignorant. Saying he is sorry. I'll make him sorry." He shook off Perez' hand, but the two girls now detained him, one on either side.

"*Señor,* the ladies protect you," he sneered.

"I am glad they think me worthy of it. Don't think

that I am afraid of you or have apologized to you. My regrets were addressed to the *señoritas,* whose pleas are necessary to remind you of the proper behavior of a gentleman."

At which the Yucatecan became so red in the face that Cranton feared he might blow up. He fairly trembled with rage. Perez stepped before him.

"Calm yourself!" he admonished quietly. "The first dance is over and others will be coming out here. Go away and forget it. Believe *Señor* Cranton when he says he did not know. When he was here three years ago, the *señoritas* were but children and were not thinking of marriage. You were in Paris and I was with my troop. He has been back only two days. And in two more, he goes into the jungle for six months. You will be married before his return."

Perez' speech gave Sanchez an opportunity to collect himself, but he was not mollified. Ignoring the American, he replied to Perez:

"Going into the jungle, is he? Well, tell him he's not going until he has settled with me. He'll be lucky if he goes at all." As he turned about, his glance fell upon the golden ornament in Dolores' hair and again his face flushed red. He snatched the dagger from her hair and threw it at Cranton's feet.

"My wife wears nothing of yours! Keep it for your own defense. And be prepared to use it. I give no warning when I strike!"

He strode away and as Perez picked up the weapon, Cranton caught a look of hatred which he directed at Sanchez' retreating back—and wondered.

How amazing was this drama in which he had been forced to take a leading part without the slightest notion of the plot, or of the motives behind the myste-

rious and surprising actions of his fellow players! It was all utterly confusing and beyond anything either in his own experience, or anything of which he had heard or read.

While his thoughts raced on, Dolores had taken the dagger from Perez, replaced it in her hair and slipped from the arbor.

"Are you armed?" Perez broke in upon Cranton's reverie, reminding him that the curtain was still up—the play in progress. He felt more like an actor on the stage than an archaeologist in a Yucatan garden.

"No! Why?"

"Oh, it's just as well to be on one's guard when one has made an enemy."

"Yes, *Tomasito,* do be careful!" pleaded Lolita in a concerned tone which caused him to look quickly at her earnest face. "Manuel is a—a very unexpected person in what he does."

"Surely not more unexpected than some other persons I know." She had the grace to look down and blush. "Besides, he has warned me what to expect from him. So, to be consistent with the character you give him, I need not expect him to carry out his threats."

"That's just a quibble," she protested, and to his amazement, he detected unshed tears in her eyes. "What I meant is that he will keep his word in an unexpected way."

"I doubt it," he retorted. "Though he has a hasty temper, he's not an assassin or a bandit. When he has cooled down, he will accept my explanation, and the incident will be closed."

"Don't count too much on that," warned Perez. "He does not cool down quickly. Not when he has been drinking—and he has had plenty today."

"That is so, *Tomasito*. You must not return to the hotel alone tonight. *Papacito* will drive you there. But try to act as if nothing has happened. You'd better dance with Dolores again."

"And with Lolita, too," Perez added generously. "Two or three times. People are talking, but if I hear any comments, I'll say that you are an *Americano,* more familiar with the customs of the ancient Mayas than with those of the modern Yucatecos, that you thought it would be a good joke to steal a dance from the fiancé of a *señorita* whom you knew so well. That is better than to say you did not know Dolores was engaged. You are too friendly with the family for anyone to believe that."

"The music has started again. We must go inside," cautioned Lolita.

CHAPTER VI

NO one had intruded upon the little group in the wisteria arbor during the intermission when many couples strolled about the garden, for which Cranton was grateful. More than anything, he wished that he might slip away unobserved to the hotel; but he felt obliged to carry out the program so hastily planned in the garden, in an effort to qualify his blundering advances. There was no satisfaction in dancing with any girl whom he could obtain for a partner, just to keep up appearances—to what purpose, he scarcely knew.

He was desolate over the news of Dolores' engagement and, to make it worse, to so ill-natured a fellow as Sanchez. The thought of Dolores married to him gave him a faint feeling—the lovely Dolores whom he had cherished so long in his heart. He had been surprised at the sudden news of Lolita's engagement to Perez, too—but Dolores!

Evidently, Lolita had informed her sister of their arrangement, for she gave him a second dance; which afforded him little satisfaction with Sanchez glowering at them from across the room. He failed to understand her attitude toward him. She had encouraged him from the first. Was it possible—but no; he recalled how she had turned on him in the garden and flung herself into Sanchez' arms.

She looked up into his eyes as if she questioned his silence, but he could think of nothing to say. It all seemed so hopeless.

"I detest him!" Dolores whispered passionately. "I

do not wish to marry him. But we have been betrothed since we were children, by our parents. And my father —he will keep his word. Always, he will keep his word. No one can move him. Only if Manuel does something unworthy of a gentleman, something very scandalous, will my father consent to break the engagement. But Manuel is too clever for that. He will talk loud and big; he will make terrible threats; but he will do—nothing! He wants me too much, perhaps for my money."

"Your money? Hasn't he plenty of his own? Isn't he a partner in—"

"Partner? Yes, whenever he will go to work. But he likes better to play. Money? Only what his papa gives him."

"And what does your father say to that?"

"That Manuel will not work in the bank because he wants to be a sisal grower. That's what he tells papa, and papa believes him, and thinks it fine, and says he will teach him how, and then take Manuel into partnership with him. But what I think is that he wants only to go into partnership with me, and then wait for both our papas to die."

All of which, thought Cranton, did not presage a very happy future for her, but he did not very well see how he could save her from it and for himself; unless he ran away with her, which would mean the loss of his only source of livelihood as well as his life's ambition, and bring down the wrath of Pedro Cocom upon both their heads.

Perhaps two days before, he would have invited even these calamities to win the fair Dolores, but—as he reviewed her behavior of the past two days, he could not regard it as altogether admirable.

The next dance with Lolita was a relief. Her understanding and sympathy were comforting, as always. She was full of regret for the disagreeable way in which Sanchez had behaved. "It had never occurred to me that you did not know Dolores and I were engaged. Of course, you wouldn't. But it has been taken for granted for so long by everyone in Merida, that we never thought to mention it. I did not know that you loved Dolores, though I knew you were fond of both of us, as friends." The last words were so low that Thomas bent toward her to catch them.

"And still am," he declared, as her eyes met his frankly. "Let us not permit this affair to spoil that friendship. I should be most unhappy to have no little friend to greet me when I return to Merida after my explorations. Remember the jolly games we used to play?"

"Indeed I do, *Tomasito*. But now I know why it was that sometimes when we were having the loveliest time, Dolores would appear and then you would forget all about me."

He glanced at her shrewdly. "And did you mind that, little girl?"

"Of course, what woman likes to be slighted for another?" she laughed.

"Woman? You were only a little girl."

Lolita shrugged her shoulders. "But a woman in the making. I thought you were marvelous, and so masterful that you would always get anything you wanted."

"I only wish I had such confidence in my own ability," he sighed.

"I've always hoped that something would happen to break Dolores' engagement to Manuel—that he'd do

something to open *Papacito's* eyes to the kind of a man he is."

The conversation was becoming too interesting to be conducted with any satisfaction in the crowded ball room, so he suggested that they walk out the rest of the dance in the patio.

Outside, he ventured, "I judge, from what you just said, that you do not like the *Señor* Sanchez."

"Like him? I despise him! And so does Dolores."

"But your father—"

"Is so old-fashioned! I know that he loves us both dearly. But he has given his word to the parents of Manuel and Ernesto and he will consider no alternative. That is the way many marriages are arranged here, especially among the upper classes, and I think it is terrible; but we have to submit to it. Every country has its customs that are stronger than its laws. And that is one of ours."

"And how does this custom that you deplore affect you?" he asked, oblivious of its personal note.

"It's all right when the wishes of the children coincide with those of the parents. And that sometimes happens."

"That is an evasive answer," he chided her. "But the *Señor* Perez seems to be an agreeable fellow. I congratulate you. By the way, do you remember that old ring I gave you just before I went away?"

"Remember it? What a strange question. I still have it. You didn't suppose I had given it away—your gift?"

"No, but you might have lost it."

"A ring like that? With such magical properties? I've kept it in a safe place, you may be sure." Instinctively, her hand went to her bosom. He noticed that she

wore about her neck a very fine gold chain which disappeared in front below the line of her corsage.

"You're wearing it?" he asked, unaware of the impertinence of his curiosity.

Lolita flushed and nodded, then drew up the chain far enough to permit him to see the ring, and dropped it back again.

"Lolita," he said suddenly, "will you give me that ring?"

She sent him a frightened, inquiring glance. "Do you mean 'lend' it to you?"

"No, make me a present of it. I want something tonight more than I ever wanted anything in my life. If you should give me the ring, it might come true."

"Do you believe the ring will make it come true?" Her fingers were again slowly drawing the ring from its hiding place—fingers which trembled; and her face had suddenly grown pale.

"I don't know; but I want the aid of anything, everything, that can help me. Didn't it bring your wish to you?"

"N-not yet," she faltered. She was fumbling with the fastening of the chain.

"And do you still wish for what you so much wanted then? Tell me the truth, please," as he saw the hesitation on her face.

Her eyes met his and the look of indecision vanished as she said, scarcely above her breath: "Yes, *Tomasito,* I do."

"Then keep the ring," he told her. "The fulfillment of your wish is equally as important as mine, and perhaps yours will also affect mine."

"What do you mean?" The pallor of her face

changed to crimson. "You don't know, you can't know, what I wished. I never told you—nor anyone."

"Are you sure? Well, anyhow, I have changed my mind about asking you to return my gift. Besides, that would not be quite fair to you, especially a gift of such potent powers."

"Thank you, *Tomasito.* If my wish were not so very important, I should give it to you gladly, but it involves the happiness of so many people—"

"Mine, too?" hopefully.

"Yours, too," she admitted, and left him.

For a time he pondered over the astounding revelations of the evening. Their complications defied all solution by human endeavor and it seemed to him that his only chance for happiness lay in the alleged magic virtues of the ring which Lolita wore next to her heart. He was powerless to extend a hand in the direction of his destiny. But, as it happened, he had opportunity before he left, to figure in the control of that destiny, without the slightest volition on his own part.

When he returned to the ball room, he found it almost deserted; and those who remained, saying their farewells. Neither Perez nor Sanchez was in sight. Indeed, Sanchez, who had been drinking heavily all the evening, had not been in evidence for the past two hours.

Cranton said goodnight to his host with the conventional assurance that he had had a delightful evening.

"Just a few minutes, my boy, and I shall drive you to the hotel," he offered, as is the custom of all Yucateco hosts.

"Thank you, *Señor,* but do not so trouble yourself. It is but a short walk."

"I insist, *Tomas.* For me it will be a pleasure."

And presently, they were speeding along the avenue in Cocom's luxuriously appointed car, driven by his chauffeur.

"Well, how do you like my future sons-in-law?" he surprised Cranton, with a quizzical expression in his eyes.

"Nothing could have surprised me more than to learn that both the *señoritas* were engaged," Cranton replied irrelevantly. "I did not know."

"It never occurred to me to tell you before. Our own affairs so completely occupied our time together. But you must know that it is not an unusual custom for families to pledge their children before they are of marriageable age. Fortunately, our children of both families are very happy over the arrangement provided for them."

Cranton wondered what he would do about it if he knew what both the girls had just told him, but he said, "I know, but somehow, I never connected the custom with your daughters. I feel that I must tell you, *Señor* Cocom, that ever since I saw your daughter, the *Señorita* Dolores, I have cherished a hope that I might win her for my wife. I have loved her during the three long years of my absence from Yucatan. So naturally, the revelations of this evening have not been so pleasant to me."

Cocom laid a sympathetic hand on his arm, "I am sorry, my boy, but there is nothing to be done about it, now. Both families are of estimable reputation and have been close friends of the Cocoms for years. The young *Señor* Sanchez is a very fine young man, high spirited and at times a little inclined to be reckless and impulsive. This is due partly to the free use of liquor, which habit he has inherited, but he will outgrow that

as do most of our youths. I will say frankly, that I do not like to see him driving his car when he is intoxicated."

And just then Sanchez passed them, driving recklessly. Cranton first noticed that it was the same car which he had encountered earlier in the evening, but the driver did not seem to notice the Cocom car.

Cocom remarked with a jest, "Talk of the devil and he is sure to appear—there is Sanchez ahead of us now."

"Are you sure that is he?"

"Have I not seen that car, with a driver wearing that cap and leather automobile coat enter my driveway too often to mistake it?" he laughed. But his laugh was abruptly terminated by the expression of horror which replaced it; for the car had speeded ahead of them, swerved toward the curb and stopped abruptly. Cocom's driver had acted quickly, but not quickly enough to avert disaster. Endeavoring to avoid crashing into the car ahead of him, he had turned out to the right and applied the brakes, but the car did not stop until it had crashed into a stone wall bordering the street.

The next thing Cranton knew, he was kneeling beside Pedro Cocom, who was groaning, his eyes closed, his lips white. Both of them had been thrown from the car, of which one wheel was broken to splinters. Cranton looked around for the other car, hoping that it had not been damaged so that Cocom could be driven home in it. But the big roadster was nowhere in sight.

"Where is that fellow who crowded us over?"

"He drove right on, *Señor,* never even looked back," replied the driver. "Is the master hurt much, you think?"

"I don't know, but we must get him home at once. Can you stop a car?"

The driver of the next passing car obligingly helped the two men to carry Cocom to it, though their efforts to move him caused the injured man much pain, then drove him to his home and assisted in carrying him into the house.

Cranton ordered a doctor, in spite of Cocom's protests that he would soon be all right.

"How about yourself?" asked Pedro.

"Oh, I only have a few scratches and bruises. It is I who will soon be all right. I think you must have a fractured rib or two. At any rate, you need a doctor, that's sure."

After a thorough examination, the doctor confirmed Cranton's conjectures and when Cocom had been made comfortable for the night, Cranton went back to the hotel. Truly, the evening had been a most extraordinary one. No further incident could have increased his bewilderment, he decided; but nothing further happened that was unusual, and he succeeded in falling asleep sometime before dawn.

CHAPTER VII

NEXT morning, Cranton found that his muscles were somewhat stiff and lame as a result of the jolt he had received, but no more so than was his brain numbed with the mental shocks it had similarly suffered. He went to Cocom's early, to inquire for his comfort and was asked to see him. He was surprised and relieved to find his friend quite comfortable and improved—only he must lie quietly for several days to allow his ribs to mend.

"But you, my good friend," solicitously, "I fear you were more injured than you will admit. I deeply regret all that happened and that your life was so endangered."

"Don't mention it, *Señor*. But since you know who the offender was, you have surely notified the *commissario* of police?"

"No," thoughtfully, "I haven't. And I am going to ask of you a special favor—two, in fact. You may not understand my motive at the present, but please do not question it; only do as I ask."

"Whatever it is, say the word, and I'll do my best."

"Then first, that you will mention last night's incident to no one—not even to my daughters; and second, that you drop out of sight for the present. I understand that last night's accident was an attack upon you because *Señor* Sanchez resented your attentions to his fiancée. There must be no opportunity for a repetition of such an attack. Not only might another prove fatal to you, but the honor and reputations of my daughters must be protected; their names must not be implicated

in such vulgar affairs. Before you have returned, their marriages will take place as has been arranged for some time. On the other hand, your departure will not display cowardice on your part. It is known that you are preparing to lead an expedition into the jungles, so your going will attract less attention than your staying. How soon can you arrange to start?"

"At once."

"Tomorrow?"

"By the early train."

"Splendid! I knew I could depend upon you."

"But the accident. If *Señor* Sanchez—"

"That, I shall attend to in my own way. There is some mystery about it which I have not yet solved, but I believe a little time will serve my purpose. I prefer to make my investigations quietly. Juan, my chauffeur, has pledged himself to secrecy, I can fully depend upon your silence and everyone else will be informed that it was only a slight accident."

Cranton's hope to win Dolores must now be just a memory. Even as he made the decision, he rebelled for a moment, tempted to remain in Merida and conclude the affair, either for or against himself. But he had given his word to Cocom. Could it be that he had plans which he had not seen practical to confide to him?

When he returned to the hotel for dinner, he was surprised to receive a note from Dolores, as brief as it was daringly unconventional. Would he meet her that evening in the shadows beside the church? She had heard of his change of plans and must see him. His hopes leaped anew. Perhaps she had something important to tell him concerning last night's event. Perhaps Cocom had already brought the scoundrel to account and denounced him as a future member of his

family—but no, Dolores would not risk her father's displeasure and her own reputation to tell him that. Cocom would tell him, himself.

However, he was at the scene of the rendezvous a half hour before the time specified in her note, and met her with outstretched hands when she slipped into the shadows.

"I must stay but a moment," she whispered breathlessly. "I had to tell you again that I am sorry I was the cause of your embarrassment last night. I hate Manuel, but no matter where my love is given papa will never cancel our betrothal. We shall have to submit to his wishes."

He despaired at losing her and protested violently: "Won't you let me tell your father how you feel about this abominable marriage? Perhaps if he knew the real facts, his sympathy and love for you would influence him. I'm sure he wants only your happiness and if I should talk with him as one man can talk with another—"

"No, no, you must not. That would never do—you do not know my father."

She was frightened at his vehemence, as he clasped his arms about her. "Promise me that you will say nothing, *Tomas*. You must leave it all to me and go in the morning as you have planned."

"To be gone for six months or more? When I return, you will have married this despicable fellow!" he remonstrated. He wondered what she would think or do if she knew that Sanchez had been the cause of her father's injury—if she knew that it was Pedro who had arranged for his own departure on the morrow; that, knowing these things she did not know, he was abandoning the whole complicated situation for another to

unravel, though it concerned both his own happiness and that of her whom he loved.

"Many things might have happened," she whispered encouragingly.

He wondered. No matter what would happen he was convinced that she loved him.

"Very well," he agreed. "I seem to have no choice but to disappear. May some miracle happen to release you from this hateful arrangement and bring you happiness," fervently.

"Oh, *Tomas,*" she whispered, throwing her arms about his neck and bursting into tears. His heart ached for her.

Suddenly, she kissed him fervently and was gone. She had done a very bold and dangerous thing in meeting Cranton thus, unchaperoned outside her home, so he dared not escort her there. But he watched her disappear down the street—his heart heavy in spite of her encouraging words. What had they implied? He could not guess. At any rate, he was helpless in this land of strange customs and conventions; he must trust all to her. She loved him, he was sure, and might possibly contrive to escape her marriage to this Sanchez.

Early the next morning he bade them all farewell with an effort to act as if nothing unusual had happened. Cocom was heartily enthusiastic with his wishes for a successful journey, Dolores strangely impassive under his ardent gaze with which he tried to tell her of his sorrow at leaving her thus. It was Lolita's farewell which most impressed him and to which his mind continually reverted in the days which followed. Tears glistened in her deep, brown eyes and her lips trembled as she fervently wished him a safe and successful return. The hand which she formally extended for him to

kiss, was cold, as that of one under emotional stress. He pressed the fingers affectionately, conscious of a responsive flood of warmth within him. No matter how bitterly disappointing were some of the memories which would follow him into the jungle, as always, his memories of Lolita would be pleasantly comforting.

Not having seen Ahmen since his first evening in Merida, he concluded that the old wizard had decided against leading him to the hidden city of Multun; so he boarded the train for Mani with this added disappointment; Ahmen had forgotten him. But the old man knew enough of the plans to enable him to follow, should he reconsider and learn that Cranton had left Merida.

Ahmen, however, was fully aware of all that had transpired, perhaps even more cognizant of the portent of events than were any of their active participants.

Only one person talked with him before he disappeared from Merida. That was Lolita—on the night after Cranton's departure. She was in the servants' quarters, where she often spent an evening amusing and fondling the children, who adored her and regarded her as something of a guardian angel.

This night, they had all been coaxed to their hammocks and Lolita rose to go, when her mysterious friend stepped from the shadows.

"Oh, how you surprised me, Ahmen. I have not seen you for so long." The sincerity of her pleasure at seeing him sounded in her voice, shone in her face.

"And it will again be long before you see me, *Señorita*. I go now upon a long journey, so long that mayhap I shall never return. The way is long and difficult and these legs which once were fleet as the deer's, have no

more that strength and swiftness. But it is well. If it please the gods that I shall return, so be it."

"I am sure it will. That will be my wish, Ahmen," she assured him.

"Ah, my heart swells at your words. And in token, it is my wish to leave with you the one earthly treasure I possess. Once, it belonged to a beautiful maiden—she whose face is now yours, she whom I loved and who loved me. There is no one else who would treasure my gift as would you—it belongs to you." He unwound a small square of cotton cloth, whose contents proved to be but a portion of a thin gold circular ornament, which he held reverently in the palm of his hand before he gave it to her.

"Mayhap you think it of no value, but to me it has long been a precious thing. The rest of the medallion and the chain is many, many suns away. I shall try to get it for you, for it is my wish that you shall be much happier in life than was the maid who owned it long ago. And if you ever do receive the rest of the jewel, you will be very happy."

"I thank you, Ahmen. I shall treasure your gift until your return. And may your gods and my saints protect you!" she smiled.

"One thing more," he held up a warning forefinger and held her gaze with his keen blue eyes. "Something happened last night of which you do not yet know, except that your father was injured in an accident. It will change the future lives of five people."

And as silently as he had come, he was gone.

When Cranton arrived in Mani, he found that Lupe was far from ready to start. He was short of horses and mules and only two of the boys he had engaged

had shown up, which was not his fault, but that of the easy-going natures of the natives. Cranton was not sorry, for while he completed the party, he hoped that Ahmen might appear.

But after three days, when he had no further reason to delay, he gave the word to go. It was a great disappointment for him to take the trail to Tuluum, for although he would enjoy the completion of the work there, he had set his heart upon six months of adventure and exploration in the wilderness.

The first day's journey toward the seacoast was fairly good going over a narrow and occasionally used road which he had traveled twice before, and which provided no incident or novelty. They made camp well before sundown. There was little for him to do, so he went to his hammock early, but was a long time getting to sleep.

He was the first to awake, crawled from his tent before sunrise and sat upon a stump, looking at the sleeping forms of his men in their hammocks. Running his eyes over them in the semi-darkness, he tried to identify each swinging figure by name, only to find that every time he attempted to fit a name to each one, there was one left over. It then occurred to him to count them. Instead of the eight who had rolled themselves up at night, nine were now sleeping peacefully in the early morning. As Cranton stepped forward to see if he could pick out the stranger, a tall figure slid from a hammock and stood erect on the opposite side of the dying fire.

"Greetings, *batab*. When I found you not in Merida, I followed you here."

"You came, I hope, to tell me you would go with me. I had given you up and am on my way to Tuluum."

"That I see. I am sorry that you have gone a day's journey in the wrong direction before I caught up with you. But my decision rested on whether I could do so without much weariness. It was so that I arrived, and I am now ready to guide you to Multun."

Cranton was so happy he could have embraced the aged wizard. After his short night's rest, he showed no signs of fatigue; and if he had merely walked from the railway in two days, it was a notable achievement for a man of ninety years. He seemed more frail, perhaps, than three years before; but his step was firm, if somewhat less elastic.

Cranton at once called Lupe and the other boys and announced their change of destination. All were indifferent to it—they had signed up for at least six months and were willing to follow where they were led.

"There is no need to retrace our steps to Mani," decided Ahmen. "They believe we have gone to Tuluum. Let them think so. It is no one's affair but our own where we go. Two miles beyond is an ancient trail which no one knows. It leads south."

"That is just what I want—no interference from others until I have thoroughly explored the place myself."

"It is so you shall have the honor of being the first white man to find this ruined city, unknown to others."

Ahmen was accordingly placed in command of the expedition.

As the day wore on, his "trail" justified the name. Now and again it led through stretches barren of trees —glades in the forest. There were slight rises that, though low, were less difficult to go around than to go over. Two of the boys went ahead, slashing a narrow path; and when their arms and backs grew lame, two

others took their places. Even so, they made slow progress. If this were the best speed they could make when following an old trail, Cranton wondered what would be their rate when they were compelled to make a new one.

As they slowly proceeded Cranton's thoughts were constantly of Dolores, during the hours which separated him farther from Merida and her. Then memories of her merged into visions of Sanchez, whose purpose had obviously been to attack his American rival —yet, why had he risked, also, the injury to his future father-in-law?

Undoubtedly, Pedro had believed that Sanchez' act had been committed while intoxicated, which excused him. Yet, why had he speeded away and made no pretense of apologizing or inquiring for Cocom's welfare? To Cranton, the whole affair seemed too deliberate to have been merely the result of drunkenness. His trend of thoughts were now interrupted by suddenly arriving at a pleasant spot to make camp.

CHAPTER VIII

THE next morning, an ancient stone road was easily discernible for some distance and led through a continuation of the pleasant camping spot. The glare and heat of the sun was tempered by the thick shade of trees draped with vines bearing red and purple flowers, forming arches over the path. Then followed a scraggly track between the trees, probably made by deer, for the explorers often saw them bound off into the forest at their approach. Vultures roosted in the trees above them and on the ground beneath were scorpions; and innumerable iguanas, or lizards, from one inch to three feet long, ran across their path and over stones.

Nor was the way devoid of danger. Once there was a sudden stop and stampede of the cargo mules, for a huge boa constrictor was crossing the path. After much cursing in Maya and lashing of the animals, the boys persuaded them to go on.

By mid-day, the party had slashed its way, by the use of *machetes,* into the foothills of a low range of mountains which revealed that they were far to the south, for there are no mountains in northern Yucatan except the range of the Cordilleras, which lie between Muna and the ancient ruins of Uxmal.

After several days, they reached the foot of a somewhat higher mountain whose ascent began precipitously and through a passage which was but a narrow gully, worn by tracks of animals and the washing of mountain torrents, so deep that the sides rose above their heads, and so narrow that in places they could barely pass

through singly without touching the sides. Furthermore, they encountered mud that was several inches deep—most unexpected at this time of the year, as it was not yet the usual time for the rainy season. It became necessary for the boys to rearrange the cargoes on the mules and they had difficulty in urging them on, lashing them and shouting at them in the Maya tongue. One stop, and all behind were blocked and unable to turn; a sudden start pressed them against the sides of the gully and there was danger of getting a leg crushed.

After several hours of this, they emerged into deep mud-holes and projecting roots of trees, which further hindered their progress up a steep ascent. The trees became larger and their roots higher, especially those of the mahogany trees, which projected their roots high at the front and tapering, unlike the roots of other trees.

Then, for a few days, their trail led over a series of gradual ascents generally clear of wood, only to reach a precipitous height; added to this, they now discovered that the rainy season was considerably ahead of schedule, as they had feared. For many long hours they dragged through mud-holes and stumbled over roots. Every step was an exertion and they were in constant danger of being thrown from their horses.

They dismounted once and attempted to walk, but the rocks and roots were so slippery and the mud so deep, that it was impossible. Once, one of the mules fell backwards with his legs kicking like a windmill in a storm, but he finally dragged himself out. Once, Cranton was thrown from his horse into a slimy mud-hole and was plastered over with the sticky stuff; and as they labored on toward the top of another rise, the ambi-

tious explorer was almost beginning to wish that he had never seen this country.

Suddenly, at about noon, they reached the top, and, with incredible relief, found a clearing which was apparently the only place on the mountain that the sun could reach, for the ground was quite dry. They lunched there, and after a few minutes' rest, began the descent.

Progress was more rapid, for less exertion was required and the mud was not so deep, due to the less dense vegetation on either side. It seemed that here there had been no rain for a day or two; and they were just congratulating themselves upon their good fortune, when the forest quickly became darker and the rain fell in torrents. By night they reached the foothills where they found a stream foaming and roaring over its rocky bed.

On its bank they camped for the night and though the rain had ceased, foreboding clouds bordered the horizon. Several of the boys ventured to grumble that they had not contracted for such a journey, and in spite of his similar sentiment, their chief observed with an attempt at encouragement:

"Clouds don't always predict rain, boys. Those may disappear before morning and the sun may be shining for us."

They forded the stream the next morning and continued their descent down the foothills. Behind them loomed the mountain with its dense forests. Now lighted brilliantly by the sun, it was a magnificent spectacle, but the men who had just toiled and floundered through its forbidding trails, saw only an ominous specter concealing death, misery and destruction.

There were many more weary days of cutting and

slashing through the almost impenetrable jungle, more rain and mud, before they came to a thickly wooded plain with a grove of wild palm trees of unusual beauty. From the tops of their tall, naked stems grew fronds twenty to thirty feet long, spreading out from the trunk and falling in graceful sweeps like enormous feather plumes. The trees stood so close together that the bending branches met and formed arches, and as they rode beneath them there was a solemn air of desolation that reminded Cranton of the columns of an Egyptian temple.

The boys cleared a circular space and made camp, for Cranton had ordered a rest for a day or two. Not infrequently during the past few days, he had remonstrated with Ahmen that it was useless to proceed further; but the old seer would only reply with philosophical quotations about nothing great being achieved with feeble effort.

All the next day he argued with himself as to whether or not it would be wise to turn back and when, at night, a cold, penetrating, illness-breeding rain set in, he decided that it would not only be the wise thing to do, but that to proceed would be the sheerest folly. By morning the rain had ceased, but their clothes and equipment were thoroughly soaked and sodden. The saddles were green with mildew and the food unpalatable; for the corn they had brought with them for making *tortillas* had sprouted from the dampness; the chocolate was mouldy. Had it not been for Ahmen's ingenuity in selecting the natural products of the jungle which were fit for food and in preparing them, they might have suffered from hunger.

But one *macalbox,* resembling a huge potato, was a meal for the whole party; and a roasted iguana tail

was a delicacy as he prepared it. At times, the weather prohibited their finding even these, however, and they were forced to resort to the stale food they had brought.

One of the boys demanded his wages that he might return, which encouraged all the boys to protest to the point of mutiny. Lupe, alone, remained loyal and temporarily pacified the boys by his words and agreeable manner; but his chief decided that Multun was probably a figment of Ahmen's vivid imagination and again voiced his decision.

"Though it is not my habit to succumb to hardship," he told his old benefactor that evening, endeavoring to conceal his waning faith in the other's wisdom, "I feel that it is my duty to you as well as to the rest of us, to return," he said with growing disappointment.

"But in my *zaztun* I saw only this day the temples of a great ruined city, which cannot be far away," he protested anxiously.

"To the devil with the *zaztun,*" irritably. "It never told us about the difficulties we've had. Or you never told us."

A shadow of sadness flitted across the old man's face, but he argued patiently. "Oah, does the God of the white man always make the path easy and filled with sunshine? When the white man stands on his knees and clasps his hands, does his God grant all he asks? No, *paal batab.* Like the gods of the Mayas, does he seek to do things ever in mysterious ways.

"I have told you that the city of your hopes and dreams is near, but yet must be covered a short and thorny path. But my words pass by those youthful ears of yours and I therefore waste no more, let we both become angry and cut in twain that great thing called

friendship which, once severed, cannot be united. And now, *batab,* I go to my hammock, under the shelter of the overhanging rock, to rest my weary bones which are no more young."

With these words, he turned to the shelter under the rocks which Lupe and the boys had arranged for him, for they all loved him and his quaint ways, in spite of their opposition to the journey.

Cranton watched him crawl stiffly into his hammock, with sympathy in his heart, and said to himself, "The old fellow should not go on like this; so for his sake as well as ours, we must turn back before it is too late."

Just then, the goddess *Ix Chel* again overturned her vase of water, which seemed to have an inexhaustible supply as the magic pitcher. "That settles it for good," he exclaimed aloud, and sought his own hammock beneath a leaky palm-covered lean-to of poles.

All night it rained. Sleep was impossible, for the improvised thatch leaked like a sieve. He was up before day; in fact, all were up and ready to turn back, for the welcome word had been passed along by Lupe. Between showers, they prepared breakfast, such as it was, consisting of chocolate with a none-too-delicious aroma, and sodden, mouldy *tortillas* made the day before, from sprouting corn.

Lupe went to call Ahmen, but returned in great agitation. "Master, master, the old wizard is gone! I found the marks of his footprints leading backward behind the rocks where he slept."

"Great God!" exclaimed Cranton, aghast. "He will go to his death. We must stop him!" Followed a volley of orders: "Gather about me. You, Emilio, I will place in command of the rest. Build a Maya house—you know how. There are plenty of palms to thatch with

and it should be done by night. Each boy to do one thing at a time. A good shelter will make you all more comfortable. And you, Lupe, are going with me to follow Ahmen's trail. Get our light packs ready and our guns and ammunition. Mind, you don't forget the emergency rations—the chocolate and parched corn. And boys, if we are not back in ten days, follow our trail until you find us or our bodies."

The boys all sprang to their tasks with alacrity, overjoyed that they need not go on. They could build a comfortable Maya house in a few hours, then lounge about, sleeping, playing games and telling stories. Instantly, the jungle echoed with the hacking sound of *machetes,* while some climbed the tall palms to lop off branches and leaves.

Lupe was ready presently and they started around the rocks where Ahmen had swung his hammock, following his trail, which at first was easily traced because of the broken vines and bushes through which he had cut.

They proceeded with all possible speed, hoping soon to overtake the old man who could not possibly have moved very fast, obliged to cut his own passage.

But after two hours, Cranton stopped to mop his face and remarked, "The old fellow moved fast!"

"Yes, master. He also had many hours ahead of us. Enrique told me that he saw him leave his hammock at midnight. But he thought nothing of it, for the old man was always prowling about."

"Well, he can't be more than a couple of miles ahead of us," hopefully.

After a few minutes' rest they resumed the trail which was now descending and presently, through the

trees, they saw water. The trail ended at a bank of a ravine of running water.

"Now we're in for it," discouraged. "The devil only knows where he came out on the other side."

They forded the water which was not very deep, and spent some time examining the bank which was rocky and would leave little trail. Then they separated, one exploring the bank north and the other south. After several hours of futile searching, they decided to push on south by compass, hoping in some way to overtake him.

Just at dusk, they glimpsed a white object through the trees and, hastening toward it, found an ancient carved stone, which indicated a proximity to more of them. But at that moment, the light disappeared completely and they must wait for the moon, hoping behind despair that it might shine through the ominous clouds which all through the day had miraculously withheld their torrents of water.

They sat upon the carved stone and waited for the moon to rise, ate a bar of chocolate, managed to get their damp tobacco to function and, after a few words, each relapsed into his own thoughts.

Through the arduous hours of the entire journey, questions had clamored for answers which Cranton's bewildered brain could not provide. What did Dolores mean when, on that memorable last night—then, why did Lolita so often drift into his thoughts and obscure those of Dolores? Always, she had been a pleasant, comforting companion. Many times during the weary hours of difficult days and sleepless nights, the pathetic wistfulness of her face as she last bade him farewell, confronted him. The vision of her seemed to add to the

effect of the chilling rain and the depressing gloom of the jungle.

Well, he knew that Dolores loved him and despised Sanchez. She had shown this clearly as she talked to him in her soft, sweet voice and had sealed it with a fervent kiss. He could not doubt her. At the thought of Sanchez, his heart hammered with tumultuous resentment. The pulses in his temples pounded remorselessly. But how could she evade her father's plans? Almost his last words to Cranton had been of his determination to proceed with her marriage plans. He sighed and—Lupe's startled exclamation aroused him.

"Look, master, look behind the *ramon* tree!"

The moon had struggled through the lowering clouds and by its misty rays they could distinguish the dim outline of a white building—then presently, of a whole group of them, for suddenly, the moon had become brighter and their outlines stood out clearly.

"Multun, and a pyramid of *Kukulcan!*" shouted Cranton. "The city of my dreams! Come on, come on, Lupe!" he cried, and across the intervening space of tangled vines he ran, falling twice in his haste as the vines tied themselves about his legs. Lupe could scarcely keep up with him.

Up the broken stairway, between the giant serpents' bodies, to the crowning temple above they scrambled, and stood, breathless, in the first corridor where, directly in front of them was a huge mask—"The face of *Kukulcan!*" exclaimed Cranton, "the great temple of the hero god of the west."

They went inside. It was dry and warm. Around the walls was a corridor and in the center of the room of the bas relief of the god, as explained by Ahmen—the Holy of Holies. In this room was a thick stone slab

supported by crouching jaguars. After a brief investigation, they descended and mounted the steps of a smaller pyramid surmounted by a well preserved building which Cranton decided to occupy.

Lupe was already gathering broken sticks and dried vines growing out of the interstices in the walls; and there was soon a roaring fire which dispersed the swarms of mosquitoes. They had nothing to cook, but by the aid of their water bottles and with several cups of water from a hollow stone, they made hot chocolate. Cranton was so relieved and happy that he sang snatches of song and jested Lupe.

But Ahmen—where was he? His face saddened. He took up his automatic and fired two shots, hoping that the old man might be near enough to hear them and be guided by the sound.

"Why, Lupe," he remembered suddenly, "We are but a short distance from the camp. Suppose you hurry back and bring up the boys and provisions. It won't take you over an hour or so. The path is cut and besides, we spent most of our time trying to find the trail at the stream."

"What an obliging and ambitious boy," he thought, as Lupe scrambled down the stairway without a moment's hesitation.

"I'll have them here by midnight, master," he called back. And, true to his word, the whole cavalcade arrived, happily urging the mules on with their *"Cluck! Cluck!"* and *"Mula! Mula!"*

But where was Ahmen, Cranton's thoughts repeated guiltily. Here he was sitting upon a stone before a pleasant fire under shelter, and the poor old fellow might be dead for all he knew. But he could do nothing

that night; for the moon was now waning and the light would soon disappear.

In the morning, his first thought was of Ahmen and he immediately organized searching parties of two boys each. All day they combed the surrounding forest in their search. Cranton was determined to find him if it took a month—his body, at least.

The boys had established themselves in another temple some distance from his. Lupe had cleared away the remains of his evening meal and he had filled his pipe. The day was closing into night in that deserted city of an ancient civilization. Another tropical thunderstorm which had suddenly and thoroughly drenched the boys just before their return from the day's search, had settled into a thin but steady downpour. In the fast-growing gloom, the gigantic ruins of the surrounding temples were rapidly merging into the far-reaching expanse of cold, dark-green jungle. A silent and spectral peace settled upon the ruined Maya metropolis—a peace that held a weird oppressiveness.

The *mulas* stood huddled together, as if by proximity to gain a little warmth and protection from the rain, at the foot of the broad stone stairway which led to the top of the great temple of *Kukulcan*.

Again his thoughts reverted to Ahmen—and Lolita. It was strange that, invariably, his thoughts of the wizard merged into thoughts of the younger Cocom daughter. Perhaps because she believed so implicitly in his magical powers. It suddenly occurred to Cranton that the wizard might have had something to tell him which would solve this love tangle of his. Ridiculous as the thought seemed, it persisted; he wondered why he had not thought to solicit his advice. Now he was gone—perhaps he might never see him again.

His reverie was interrupted by a stir from the opposite temple. He looked across curiously. The boys had all risen from their reclining positions about the fire, and through the haze of rain and smoke, he saw them standing alert and watchful, listening.

Cranton peered beyond the glowing embers of his fire, into the darkness, and discerned a tall, shadowy form slowly climbing the temple stairway. Through the mist and smoke, it appeared like a wraith—and presently, Ahmen entered the temple and stood before him. He attempted to speak, but no sound escaped his pale lips; then he raised his hands and fell forward in a heap.

Cranton had leaped to his assistance and broke his fall, and Lupe was instantly in action. They laid him upon a stone bench, wrapped him in a blanket, forced liquor between his blue lips, chafed his thin, bony hands; and he finally passed from a faint into a natural sleep.

Cranton rejoiced over his return and optimistically declared to the boys that he was only exhausted and would recover with rest. The old man slept for two days; then awoke and ate some broth made from a wild turkey which Lupe had shot. He was not encouraged to talk, for which he seemed to have no inclination; but late in the afternoon he broke his silence:

"At the time between two days, *paal batab,* I arose from a troubled dream. I dreamed that the god of the forest, *Yumkax,* came to me and said, 'Arise and come with me to the great city of Multun. I will show you the path.' Then, he described the path and the way to go to reach this great city of the dead. He told me that the path went toward the place where the sun is swallowed at evening by the Great Serpent, which I could

not believe. But he was right and I was wrong; and only the noise of your guns saved me. I was more than a day too far east, but I turned at the sound of your gun and here am I, *batab*. And I did not lead you wrongly."

"Well, old friend, your indecision was from eating the mouldy tortillas made from the sprouting corn," laughed Cranton.

"Not so, not so, *batab*. I should have looked into my *zaztun,* to make sure, as I usually do."

His listener did not smile. Instead, he asked seriously, "Perhaps your *zaztun* will tell me some things I want very much to know?"

"Often that which we are most anxious to know, *batab,* is withheld from our vision until it is best to be known. Ever is man impatient for the future, often neglecting the present in his eagerness for the morrow. And why? Does not the morrow often bring as full measure of grief as the past? Is it the grief of the morrow we seek? Nay, not so. Always, we dream that the morrow holds only joy and the fulfillment of our wishes. So, in our haste for the future, we pass the present with unseeing eyes, unfeeling hearts. We are blinded to that we should give our deepest thoughts, lured on by our dreams of some future thing on which we have set our hearts, made glamorous by those dreams.

"Now for days have you passed through the jungle with a quick step but a heavy heart. The thought of a woman has gnawed at it like a worm at the root of a tree."

"How did you know that?" astonished.

"Oah, many things do I know that are hidden from

the sight of the white man; oftentimes does my knowledge keep the god of night from closing my eyes."

"I believe you. Anyway, your recovery has made a cheerful evening of one which promised to be lonely and anxious for me."

"Great words, *batab*. Many times have I heard such words from men and even from women—though these carried no weight with me—but you, I know well, and wasting words is no part of your nature."

"What do you know of women?" Cranton next asked, smiling, hoping to start him off on a conversation from which he might learn something valuable.

"I, who have learned much from women and will know no more, could tell you much of wisdom concerning them," sagely. "Strong with the strength of man they can be in moments of need; in others, fickle to the faith that is placed in them. Yet must we have them or our race dies, and necessary beyond all else do they seem at times to man's happiness."

He paused to take a long puff at his *cigarro* before continuing, when his next words surprised the listener: "You love a beautiful flower that blooms in the garden of Pedro Cocom in the city of Merida; yet you leave the blossom to be plucked by another. Is it not so?"

"You are indeed a wizard! There is a far sight in those keen blue eyes of yours. Since this much you know, I'd like your advice in this matter, for it's true that I've been much troubled."

"Such advice as I have would be in a tale that would take much telling, *batab*. Not before two days would my mouth be closed and the tale finished; and mayhap long ere then you would weary of it. Yet am I drawn to tell you this tale, for my *zaztun* has told me much of your love for the flower in Merida. And the daugh-

ters of Cocom control your destiny even as the two Maya princesses, Ixkan and Ixlol, whom they resemble in face and character, once controlled mine."

The old man lapsed into meditative silence, ruminating over the days long past; while the white man sat opposite him, immovable, lest some motion of his would distract the old fellow and rob him of the story he eagerly anticipated.

"The tale I have to tell is long, *batab,*" he reiterated, "but well you may profit from it, so that the blindness of pride and false understanding may not rob you as I have been robbed. Listen carefully, for what I have to say is the fruit of my youth which has been nurtured by experience and knowledge gained long ago in the far-off Land of the Deer. She, in Merida, who truly loves you, will never go to one unless first the love of her soul and heart is given. That is the will of *Ixyacunah,* goddess of love, and the king of the gods, *Hunabku.* Tomorrow, when the god of night has given more strength to my weakened body, will I begin the tale which you must hear and profit by." And he rolled over in his hammock and fell asleep almost instantly.

Puzzled over his words and the mysterious references to his youth, Cranton followed the wizard's example, eager for the dawn of the morrow. Since the rain continued and would prohibit any activities for several days at least, he welcomed the story as an interesting diversion as well as for the wisdom which Ahmen had intimated that he would glean from it.

When, on the following morning, the breakfast remains had been cleared away by Lupe, and they were seated on either side of the fire, Cranton suggested, "May I offer you a measure of *xtabentun* to warm your blood?" Without waiting for his acquiescence, he

suited the action to the words and continued, "Likewise, I offer you the white man's incense which you may smoke if you will, in a white man's pipe or, if you prefer, in your corn-husk wrappings."

Warmed by the drink of *xtabentun,* the wizard was soon settled and contentedly smoking a cigarette of his own making from tobacco wrapped in a corn husk.

Cranton respected his silence and waited; for well he knew that the old Indian was aware of what he awaited—a promised story. Silently, he offered him a second cup of the beverage, which was accepted as silently.

CHAPTER IX

AHMEN drained the cup and began:

"This is a tale that has never been told. Since before your father's mother bore him, and my years were even then as many as yours, I have been like a *chuh,* or water-gourd, filled with sweet and bitter memories. These have I shared with no one, being a wise man, wiser than most, who was given to know from the beginning of my days, that silence is a valuable thing. Much have I to say when it pleases me, but these memories have I shared with no one, for they have been all that life held for me and all that held me to life. But this old gourd will soon be broken and cast aside, and all that it holds will be spilled and wasted, unless it be poured, while time still serves, into a worthy vessel.

"You, *paal batab,* have I chosen as the new *chuh,* to hold fast what I now trust to your keeping. Treasure these memories that are mine. Mingle them with your own. So may you be strengthened to escape the sorrows I have suffered, and to win the joy I lost ere I could grasp it.

"First, I would speak of myself—not because of my pride in my forefathers, but to prove to you that the story comes from the lips of one worthy of the tale. I, Ahmen, am the son of the great Maya race of those whose father was *Itzamna;* not an Indian as my people are called because of a mistake made by a certain Spaniard, the white man who sailed for many months across the dark waters and found this America. He thought it was another land and gave the name of Indians to its

Maya people—so must they be called forever. Even the people of this country who are called white, have in them still that same Maya blood. So all the people of Yucatan are truly the children of the great Maya race of my fathers whose shores were once bathed by two oceans and even more. I am one who has seen much of this country of the Mayas, as well as that land of *Quetzalcoatl,* now called old Mexico, from whence in ancient times, came the fierce tribes that overran this fair land of the deer and the wild turkey.

"I know this world and have experienced much in it and have suffered more. But withal, I am not a man to forget those I love and who mayhap love me, and in that heaven of the Mayas, I hope once more to see them. My peoples' ancient religion holds within it many smaller gods, but well do I know that there is but one supreme God, *Hunabku*—which, in your language as well as ours, means one Holy One—who does all things for the good of all His children. Being one of His children, our God must also be yours, *batab,* for the one and only God must be *Hunabku.* He made us with the same thoughts, though for some reason which He holds secret, He made us of different colors; yet all are equal in His eyes. So say the Holy men, when reading from the great Book. Is it not so, *paal batab?*"

"You are right, Ahmen," Cranton agreed, eager for the narrator to proceed into his story. But he was ready to exercise patience, since it is quite impossible for a Maya to begin at once on a direct narrative. He must reach his point by devious ways of his own, by the use of figurative language and omitting not the slightest detail. Incidents of the least significance assume individual importance throughout the story.

It would be impossible to relate Ahmen's story ex-

actly as he told it to Cranton. Although some of his similes and metaphors were so vivid and picturesque and illuminating that they are invaluable to the story, others were merely roundabout methods of conveying ideas which can best be expressed in the English idiom, though at the loss of much of the poetic imagery and rhythm of the Mayan vernacular.

His throat had gone dry before he really embarked upon the narrative which Cranton anticipated, and another draught of *xtabentun* was necessary to get him going again.

"I had rested one night in a ruined temple of this very city which, from lack of knowledge of its true name, I have called Multun—meaning a hill of stone. So its tallest temple appeared to me in that long distant day as the bright smile of *Kin,* the sun god, fell upon its summit that rose like a great rock above the treetops when the morning was still young.

"Like the morning, I, too, was young. I had lately come from fighting in the army of the great Jaurez, until the enemy hosts had fled, like dust blown upon the highway, before the hot blasts of our firearms.

"Now I am not one to boast, but because I was strong and tall and had learned somewhat of the knowledge of books, had a lusty voice like the bass of the blast of the conch shell and the fear of death was not in me, I was chosen to lead others and made a captain in the army, by a paper signed by the great Jaurez, himself.

"Then when the enemy had been driven from the land of the *Quetzal,* came a dispute as to who of its own sons should rule the country; and that dispute, I thought, they who sought the power could best settle among themselves. So, having enough of warfare, my

desire was to place it so far behind me that I should hear no more of it. For though I have been a great soldier and when I fight so great a rage holds me that I have no more heed for my own safety than for that of the enemy, yet have I even been one to live in peace with all mankind, if I could do so with pride and honor.

"So it was, that when I returned from the war and an explorer asked me to guide him to many ancient ruins, far to the southward, of which he had heard and wished to visit, I went with pleasure. Then, like yourself, *paal batab,* he had no desire to return until he could behold some ruined city that no white man had ever seen. To my keen ears—for I am one who sees and learns much with silence—there had come rumors of a great empty city in a region farther to the south in the hills, of which spoke wandering Indian hunters.

"Now my chief promised me a large reward if I should find it and return to lead him to it. So I gladly set forth, alone, to find the ruins if there were such, where later I might lead the expedition and receive the generous reward. After many days, when it seemed that I must turn back, even as you would have, *batab,* I found trace of a Maya road which led, after many more days, to this city. Great joy filled me that I had found that which I sought, and it was with peace that I found rest in one of the temples that night.

"Had I not rested there that night, this tale would never have been told, and my life would have been lived without its romance and an adventure so strange that few would now believe its truth. So, oftentimes, do our whole lives rest upon one small act or event which in itself seems to hold little importance.

"Awakened by the first beams of the rising sun, and mindful of the long journey before me, back to the

ruined city where waited the party I was guiding, I was about to prepare the food which would give my body strength. Then, as I bent over the fire with the doorway behind me, a shadow fell upon me, as if *Kin,* who lights the earth, had hidden his face behind a cloud. This filled me with surprise, for it was not the season of rain and the sky had been clear when I looked without. When the shadow formed into that of a man, I was startled—but not filled with fear, for I have said that in the heart of a warrior there is no fear.

"I went on about my work of cooking my morning meal. Who the man could be I knew not, but if he were friend I had naught to fear; if he were foe, he was already my captor. If he had aught to say to me, let him speak. At last my fire was lighted and burning well and I rose to get the food to place over it. This brought me face to face with my mysterious visitor with no trace of fear upon my countenance—indeed, I had none, for what enemy had I in this land?

"If he had been mysterious before I saw him, the sight of him but doubled the mystery. It was as if one of the sculptured forms on yonder door-post had come to life to see what bold stranger had entered the place he guarded. By his dark hair and skin, and his face, I knew him to be a Maya like myself. His costume, or lack of it, was that of a long-past age, now seen in the pictures on temple walls and carved on stone figures. He wore naught but a wide belt, with square ends falling down before and behind, and sandals. His body was straight and strong as a giant tree which stands alone in the forest, his face was pleasing to behold, his years about my own, his height almost. He looked at me with a keen eye and as if he were well pleased.

" 'Greeting,' he said in the ancient tongue of the Maya.

" 'Welcome to you,' I answered, and bade him share my morning meal, since he seemed a friend.

" 'Thanks, I have eaten,' he replied, and yet he stood in the doorway. 'What do you here, in this temple far from the abodes of men?'

" 'I have been where men are many, and at strife; and I have come here for peace and to be alone,' I said. I had no liking for his close questioning but he boldly went on:

" 'Are you a warrior and a great commander?'

" 'I have been. And I have not forgotten how to fight, when what it pleases me to have, cannot be had in another way.'

" 'What rank held you?'

" 'I commanded many men in battle and in camp, and none dared stand unbidden between me and the sun.' My anger was much stirred, for he spoke as a chieftain to one of lesser rank while he still stood where he shut the light from out the room. I thought my words would anger him, but his face grew the brighter.

" 'That is well,' he said. 'You are then the very one whom I have sought. I am commanded by my king to bring you to his presence in his city of Zacna.'

"Now I had never heard of Zacna or its king. Naught was he to me and my own affairs commanded my attention. So I gave no heed to the stranger's words and returned to my cooking. I was turned from him so I could not see his face, but his voice was sharp and stern.

" 'Do you refuse to obey the summons of the mighty King Cocom of Zacna, ruler of the Itza tribe of *Luumilkay,* children of the Mayas?'

" 'Nay, I would not be discourteous to a king, even though I am not subject to him,' I answered. 'But now other matters await my attention. When they are out of the way, it will give me pleasure to visit him in his kingdom if he will give me safe conduct.' Again did I turn to take the food from the fire, when a shrill blast sounded in my ear. I turned about in time to see—and to hear—the stranger blow another blast on a reed whistle he had taken from his belt.

"Instantly, many other dark and almost naked men sprang into sight and rushed up the steps of our pyramid, while more came running from around both sides of the temple. All were well armed.

"As the men lined up behind the one who had spoken to me and stood like stone figures at attention, I decided it would be well to do as he bade me. I held up my hand in the sign of peaceful salutation and said:

" 'My affairs may be less important than the wishes of your king. If you will but show me that which gives you the right to command me, I shall go with you.' He might well have pointed to his well-armed bodyguard as authority enough, but he smiled and held up his right hand, on the forefinger of which he wore a large gold ring, engraved with a coiled serpent—an ancient sign of rank. You have seen such a ring."

Cranton nodded. Had the old man not given him such a ring on the occasion when he had saved his life, and had he not, in turn, given it to Lolita, who now wore it on a chain about her neck? He wondered if it could be the same ring. Ahmen continued:

"I did not know what rank he held, but soon learned.

" 'Canich is my name. I am *Halachuinicahau,*' my captor explained.

"Now that was the title of the greatest chieftains of

ancient times—they who stood next to the king himself and led his armies in battle. I could not guess what manner of king was served by this man who spake with so great dignity and so little rudeness. Perhaps he was the chief of some small tribe hidden away, that had kept up some of the titles, fashions and ceremonies of the ancient days and whom it would be an honor to visit. He could bear me no ill-will, and if I treated him as did his own people, I had naught to fear from him. I began to think it well that I had met with Canich, for might this meeting not prove, after all, to be a fortunate one?

"I thanked Canich for his consideration of me, whom he had in his complete power; and in reply he bade me eat the food I had prepared, since he and his men had already eaten theirs. It was also his wish—as I afterward learned—that I should feel I was his guest rather than a captive; so, pleased with his friendly manner, I finished my meal without haste, packed up my small henequen bag and reported that I was ready. He bade me walk beside him and, as we led the way down the broken stairway, his men marched behind us, two by two to the number of a score. Below were two litters waiting, each borne by eight men, with eight others to relieve them. I soon learned that I was to travel in one of these, Canich in the other; and at his command we were started on our journey.

"Great was my surprise at the honor thus paid me, for though I had traveled many miles in my wanderings, even at that time, it was usually on foot, sometimes on muleback which is worse, and sometimes on a horse. But this was the first time I had traveled like a king, carried along at a swift pace by eight strong men who followed the litter where rode my captor. I was

careful, however, to let no look of my surprise show in my face and accepted the honor as one always used to being thus served. As I have said, I had learned that it is most wise to keep silence and let no shadow of my thoughts cloud my face. I was indeed a guest of Canich, but I was greatly puzzled as to why such an honor had been forced upon me.

"But I was young and ready for any adventure which promised to be new and filled with excitement, so I decided to put a good face on it while I watched keenly all that would happen. For none should be too cunning for Ahmen. I am not one to boast, but my life as a warrior and leader of men in peace as well as war, had taught me to be wary of all men, whether they be friend or enemy. For how can we say, *paal batab,* who would be a friend? He who would seem most honorable so often turns the traitor.

"The swift pace at which we had started in the morning soon slackened as we entered the forest along the new trail which had been cut by Canich's party. And when we had entered the mountainous country to the southeast, more slowly we went and the litter bearers made change for rest the more often.

"When we had reached the highest point of one of the foothills that can be seen from here on a day when the air is clear from the blue of the heavens, it was time to make camp for the night.

"With the passing of the days, when I could watch my captor—in the full light and busy with the command of his men—I found him most pleasing to my eye. He was a man of dark hair and skin, about my own years and with a strong face. He was kind as well as firm in his commands, quiet and proud. As quick as a jaguar in action, yet he moved with a stately step

while the muscles glided beneath his smooth skin like a *canoa* on the current of a smooth stream. Small was my wonder that his rank was second only to the king; for such men but live to be leaders of men. Never is the loud and cruel master a true leader. For once his followers rebel, he is overthrown.

"When the *kin* smiled upon us next morning we ate breakfast of wild fruit, gathered by the bearers, toasted *tortillas* and honey; then we journeyed on through a region that led more and more into the high mountains and more difficult to travel, though I reclined at ease in my litter and it mattered not to me how rough the going.

"Now our journey led through a great space covered with thick vines which caught at the feet of the men as if to hold them back, though we followed the path which they had made on their journey toward Multun. At times we would come forth into a clear space and then would our eyes rest upon a scene of such beauty that my heart grew warm within me and my mouth is closed when I try to speak fully of it. Silently did I thank the god of growth for his work.

"We passed through a jungle path, overhung with flowers and vines of every color, orchids grew in every tree, birds of gay feathers flew about singing their sweetest songs. Red and green parrots jabbered to each other and monkeys swung from tree to tree, peering down at us with their so strange faces like to faces of men. I have thought how, indeed, they are little men with small minds; and I have seen men, *paal batab,* as even have you, whose faces showed but little greater minds. It would seem that these, mayhap, were once the great forefathers of us all in many ages past.

"But I must not stop the telling of that which you

would most desire to hear, to show you in words the beauty and glory of days long dead.

"Now into the midst of such peace and beauty came danger and trouble. Came one of the men running toward Canich with something in his hands, and when he drew closer, I saw that it was a baby jaguar.

" 'Put away that animal,' I shouted, knowing well the danger of such an act.

"But Canich held the animal in his hands gently and turned about to tell me that he wished to take the baby jaguar to his sister, Nicte, for a pet. He had made promise to bring her such a gift. To the bearers he spake, 'Hold your spears in readiness and keep open your eyes for the mother jaguar.'

"When once more we started, in my heart was much fear for Canich and I was not surprised at that which followed. We had gone but a short way when, with a suddenness of a falling star, a great spotted form hurled through the air and fell with a loud voice upon the litter where lay Canich. It was the mother jaguar!

"With a quickness as great as that of the jaguar and before the bearers had time to act, I leaped from my own litter, grasped a spear from the hand of a fleeing servant and ran toward Canich.

"He did not drop the jaguar he held, which further hindered him, and he also was unarmed, for his bearer who carried his weapons fled on the instant. Without a pause, I aimed my spear at the beast and sent it straight into her side; but it did not end her life. She turned upon me. My spear was now in the jaguar's side and I was without a weapon. With a swiftness as that of the *hulche* dancer, I grabbed the beast by the throat as she sprang toward me and plucked my spear from

I leaped from my own litter and grasped a spear

her side with my other hand, thrusting it into her once more.

"It is said that fear of death will make men do undreamed-of things, and so it must have been with me that day, for my own skill did surprise me greatly.

"It was the end of the beast, but I could not spring quickly enough from her, for with her last moment of strength she thrust her hind leg downward and her sharp claws tore a long gash in my leg that bade fair to bring my end with her own.

"In a few minutes I felt that my end was near. Then the bearers rushed forward and as the blood flowed from my wound, my senses left me and I knew nothing of what further happened for some days."

CHAPTER X

IT was still many days before I came back to understanding and could travel. How long it was, I know not, but when I opened my eyes I found myself upon a bed made of a crosswork of vines, woven together. On this had been laid many broad leaves and over my head was a roof; indeed, I lay in a room of good build much like the houses of Maya Indians. I was looking about with both eyes when Canich came to the open door space and crossed swiftly to my side.

" 'Ah, happy am I to see you returned to this world again, friend who has saved my life,' he cried. Then did he tell me that I had lain long thus, sometimes with little sign of life within me.

"I saw that his manner toward me had changed greatly. Before, he had been friendly, as one noble man to another—which may sometimes not show his true feelings. Now he showed me the face of a friend which tells his feelings in many ways; and henceforth he honored me in every way according to his way of thinking, and though there were times when I had wished that his thoughts were different, I never once had doubt of his friendship for me. But when I sought to learn the reason for his capture of me against my wish, he would say naught but that it was the pleasure of his king.

"Canich would not continue our journey until I was stronger, so for the space of four more days I lay in the room which the bearers had built about me and all things were done for my comfort, so that on the fourth day I was ready to be carried on our way.

"You may wonder that I made no effort to escape

from those who held me captive. It was not that such thoughts did not cross my mind, but because not once might I have done so. Never for a moment did the eyes of my captors leave my body, and what is one man against men to the number of almost two score? Besides, these men held a great attraction for me and I was of a mind to see the country from which they came, their city and their king. Had I but known then, just what was the reason for my capture, I should have tried to escape, though I met my death in so doing.

"After many more days' travel, our path turned downward, and a few hours brought us to what looked to be a long and narrow lake.

" 'From here,' said Canich, 'we travel by water, which leaves no footprints. In no other way may we enter *Luumilkay.*' Now the meaning of that word is, 'Land of the Deer.'

Our bearers left us and soon appeared with *canoas* which they had brought from some hiding place. They were as skilled with the paddle as with throwing the dart. The *canoas* were made of great logs hollowed out by fire and tempered copper chisels, and each could carry from twelve to fifteen men. Canich and I led the way in one, with eight men at the paddles, and we moved swiftly and smoothly through the water which flowed with a slow current. This told me that what I had thought was a lake was in truth a wide stretch of some river of which I had never heard, nor seen on any map.

"Early on the second day, after entering the river, the banks came closer together and the current grew the swifter until, just as the *kin* was looking down upon us from straight over our heads, we plunged into a narrow gorge between high cliffs and great was the

speed with which we sailed along. Below us the water foamed and gurgled like the water thrown into a *cenote* by an underground river, and rose in choppy waves that splashed into the *canoa,* then rushed onward with a force that would have shattered our craft to splinters had we met with an obstacle in our way. All the skill and strength of the crew was used in keeping the *canoa* in the center of the stream, trying now to hold it back instead of pushing forward.

"In the flash of an eye we turned about a bend in the chasm and a giant mountain rose up directly in our path so that the water of the river was dashed into spray as it met with the wall of rock where it seemed that the *canoa* must be dashed to pieces in the space of a dozen breaths, for we went toward the wall with the speed of a great wind. Next I saw that the men were again paddling with all their strength and that Canich looked calmly ahead and stooped to take two candles of beeswax from a pack at his feet. Though I saw no way to escape our destruction, it would seem that no one else held fear, so why should I?

"I suspect that it was to test my nerve that I had no warning of what was about to happen, but seeing the candles gave me some hint of it. Yet, just what did happen, I did not see; for, just at that moment when it seemed we should strike the cliff, the men drew their paddles from the water and fell flat upon their faces, while I felt my own head forced down between my knees by Canich who had shouted, 'down!' but I had not been quick to obey. There was a sound of wood scraping against rock, a quiver of the *canoa* and I felt my head released. Slowly, I raised it and looked about me to find that we were in a cavern filled with a faint light the color of the *yaxkukul,* the blue-green feather

of the royal bird. I looked over the side of the boat and found that the water was now smooth and so clear that one could see to its utmost depths which looked like a thousand lengths of a man, where fishes of many kinds and shapes seemed to all be of a yellow color. This may have been caused by the light reflected into the cave through the sunlit water. I do not know. But a magic beauty was on everything. Then Canich made fire with a flint and lighted two candles, giving one to me. Again, as if by magic, all this strange beauty was gone.

"The men began to paddle and we rushed through a natural tunnel lighted only by the candles we held. The men in the other boats, too, held lighted candles. There are many rivers in Yucatan that run underground, but few that are above. This was the first one I had known to bore its way under a mountain. In silence we traveled on for a long time before Canich spoke to me:

" 'Before the candles burn low we shall be where the river comes out again into the light of day. This is always dangerous, and now the danger is the greater, for the opening will all be below the surface of the water except at one narrow but high place which leads to foaming water filled with great rocks.

" 'At this passage you may sit upright and see where you are going, but when I say *"nohbeha,"* hold yourself straight and steady and move not a hair's width to either side.'

"Canich had but given me this warning when the river took a sudden dip and we began to slide down a hill of swiftly moving water with even greater speed than we had entered this strange cavern. Again the men spent all their effort to keep the *canoa* in midstream. Far ahead of us appeared a speck of light—

the opening through which we must pass. Now our boat began to rock. I looked ahead hoping that it might soon be over. The boat scraped against the sides of the high walls. I looked again, but the hole still looked too small for our boat to pass through, but through it I saw a bright light.

"Then our candles went out from the splash of a great wave which we struck. When I got the water out of my eyes, I looked again for the hole. Should we never reach it? There was a loud roar which echoed with a voice like thunder, which almost deafened me. I could see the opening ahead, growing larger from the light beyond—the boat was full of water—it scraped the bottom. 'This is the end,' I thought. Just as I was about to say a prayer, above the din I heard a shout from Canich, *'nohbeha!'*—and we darted through the hole, our boat scraping and tearing apart. Suddenly appeared a blinding light, the sound of smashing wood, and we shot into the light of day with a force that seemed strong enough to carry us like a bird through the air to mountains in the distance. I saw tumbled waters that were all about us, into which we quickly dropped with a jar that I thought would drive my backbone up through my skull. The next moment I was struggling in the water which filled my mouth, and then my inward parts, and took away my senses.

"I opened my eyes to find myself lying on a large, flat rock beyond the stretch of foaming water—which you call whirlpool, *batab*. Several men were pounding and rolling me over and back, forcing the water out of my aching body and the air into it. There were others in the same condition, two of whom did not revive; and there were three who went to their Maya gods before they were pulled out of the whirlpool. All the *canoas*

had capsized and smashed in being cast from the belly of the mountain.

"Canich told me this was due to the fullness of the river swollen by the rains and was something he had feared when the unexpected length of the journey in searching for me, and the weeks spent in camp while I recovered from my wounds from the claw of the jaguar, had delayed our return until the time it was safe to make the trip through the mountain. But as there was no other way to enter *Luumilkay,* he had been forced to take the risk.

" 'Tell me,' I asked him, 'if *nohbeha,* the great water road, is the only gateway to your country, and it is a path so difficult when you move with the current, how do you get out?'

"His reply threw no light on my suggestion, but stirred thoughts within me that were not all pleasant:

" 'None that enters *Luumilkay* needs desire to leave it, and to those that must adventure forth, if they be permitted, is known the way.'

"We made camp for the night and when I asked for my clothes which were stripped from me when I was taken from the whirlpool, I was told that they were much torn, but that new ones would be ready for me in the morning.

"By the light of day I found that we were near a camp which appeared to have been used for a long time. Trees had been cut down, shelters erected, plants and vines were trampled for a wide space about, and it seemed that men had waited long for our arrival, with supplies, new clothes and comfortable palanquins for the rest of our journey. The new clothes supplied me were of such fineness as I had never worn next to my body in all my life.

"When I had examined them, I felt that should I wear them I should be attired for the grand carnival in Merida. I decided to keep my old ones, though they were somewhat soiled and torn.

"Canich, when attired in his new costume, was most elegantly dressed. Over his body he wore a cuirass of beaten gold, below this a wide belt of snakeskin from which hung a skirt of the finest white doeskin. His high-topped sandals were of embossed leather. At his knees were feather protectors and about his shoulders was a cape of feathers reaching to below his knees. Upon his head was a golden helmet shaped like the head of a serpent, and from its crest flowed the long tail feathers of the royal *quetzal* bird, that you call by another name. Because its feathers are worn only by kings and those of noble birth and rank, I knew that he was in truth the man he had said he was—next to the ruler of his country—and that the kingdom must be one of great power and wealth to have such men.

"About his neck Canich now wore a string of large polished green beads, from which hung a jade pendant showing a carved head of the god *Kukulcan.* In his hand he carried a double-serpent-entwined *caluac,* his baton of authority, which replaced the plainer one he had carried into the jungle. His weapons were borne by a new bearer and were much decorated. Besides the weapons were two shields; one made of strong knotted cords for catching, or turning aside from their course, the darts of the *hulche,* or it could be thrown over the head of the enemy to trap him; the other shield was of wood, round, with an image of the sun god embossed in gold in the center. When not in use it was covered with a wrap of stout cotton cloth, like to what you call 'canvas.'

"Added to all these were knives of different shapes and sizes, set with rubber into handles of gold or carved *sapote* wood. These knives were very sharp. You, *batab,* have seen knives of like pattern that were thrown into the Sacred Well of Chichen Itza thousands of years ago, and taken out by white men. And this was proof to me that the people of *Luumilkay* were of the same Itza branch of the Maya race from which I and Pedro Cocom have come. I do not put my name above his boastfully. We both are brave of heart and have great wealth—his, of gold; but mine is of greatest value—the wealth of knowledge and experience.

"Now, instead of rough litters made of poles and vines, Canich and I were borne in gorgeous palanquins. The soft cushions were comforting to my aching bones, caused by falling into the whirlpool on the day before. The curtains at the two sides were made all of threads of plants interwoven with threads of gold, like the decoration on the new clothes which had been offered me. My old and worn ones looked quite out of place, but mayhap I should some day wear the new ones. When we neared the city, people came about us in great numbers desiring to see the stranger, but I drew the curtains about me to hide myself.

"The road on which we now traveled, toward the city of Zacna, was of flat, white stones, square-cut, that were fitted together with much skill. I learned from Canich that it was ages old, and little was known of those who had made it, save that they were of the race that built the city and were the forefathers of those who now dwelt there.

" 'Our ancient records tell something of this road,' he said, 'and in our archives are maps of many other roads, and the names of the *katuns* of years when they

were made. On some of the marking stones that you will see at equal spaces along this road, the dates are cut. Those who can read the letters written by the priests can find much of interest in the temple books and in the books of the nobles.'

"The road was so even, the pace of the bearers so like the swaying measures of sweet music and the cushions so restful that even while I dreamed of honors which might come to me, I fell asleep. And that, *paal batab,* is what I could do at this moment with great comfort."

Whereupon Ahmen shut his eyes, lay back in his hammock and was instantly asleep. Cranton agreed that it was time the old man rested. The twilight was upon them and there was a chill in the air. He clapped his hands for Lupe to replenish the dying fire.

Ahmen awoke in time for supper, which revived him, and even took a few turns up and down the terrace, before squatting down beside the fire to smoke an American-made cigarette which Cranton gave him. Then he quaffed a little more of the Yucatan-made beverage.

Repetitions of this, interspersed with talk of the plans for Cranton's work in Multun occupied the evening.

CHAPTER XI

ALL night long it rained, and by mid-morning the downpour had changed to a ceaseless drizzle. After breakfast, when the boys had replenished the fire and placed a stack of wood beside Cranton, they disappeared—all but Lupe, who silently remained. Ahmen had returned to his hammock well supplied with tobacco and corn husk wrappers for *cigarros,* while Cranton reclined upon an improvised couch made from canvas shelters, blankets and extra clothing spread upon boxes of food supplies and equipment. He feared for a moment that the narrator was going to take a nap when he closed his eyes; instead, he held up his hand to command attention. With his eyes still closed, he began:

"Swish, swish, swish. Hearken, *batab,* to the soft rain as it falls on the dead leaves and parched shrubs burned to a crispness by the heat of the sun, we call *kin.* Even so, once again do I hear the swish, swish, swish of the feet of the bearers as they bore my palanquin along that white and ancient road. And as with the swish, swish, swish of the feet of the bearers sent by the rain god to summon me, do I near the end of my life's journey; so with the shuffling footsteps of the bearers sent by the king of Zacna, was I borne to the end of my journey on that day so long ago. Little knew I then what the end of that journey would bring me, and little know I now what will follow this one. I hold my hopes and my beliefs; but they may be as far from truth as they proved to be then." Ahmen seemed to be

dozing off, so Thomas cast a stick upon the fire, which caused him to stir, open his eyes and begin anew:

"As I was borne along, I looked about me, now on one side, now on the other, to note the people and the kind of country we were in. We seemed to be in a great and fertile valley surrounded by the lofty mountains we had left behind us, and by more distant heights that rose on either hand and far away to the south.

"With surprise, I saw that there were great numbers of strongly built people dwelling closely together and that the fields were well cared for and larger than those of the Indians you have seen, *batab,* but the crops were thin and drying as if the rain had been long withheld from them.

"The houses of the common people were no different from those you see everywhere in Yucatan, thatched and with rounded ends, built of poles placed in the ground with vine-stalks woven in and out for walls, a single opening serving for door and window. So many were these houses along the highway that we seemed to be passing through an endless village.

"When we were yet some distance from the city, Canich sent one of his swiftest runners ahead to notify the king of our approach.

"Just as the sun in its downward flight reached the level of the place where the heavens touch the earth, we climbed a rise in the ground and stopped—Zacna lay before us. Unknown city of a forgotten tribe of Mayas, it stood revealed to me as if hanging from the heavens, the tops of its templed pyramids veiled with white clouds, while the rest of the buildings were lighted by the long rays of the departing sun. It was a picture of great beauty for the eye to behold and I

gazed upon it with wonder until the carriers had rested, then we entered its gates.

"How different, *batab,* from the cities you have seen only in tumbled ruins, overgrown with foliage until they have become only places of wildness and destruction! The central part of the city where were all the large buildings and the houses of the people of rank, was surrounded by a high wall of stone, in which were gates to roads that ran into the country from all four directions. On both sides of these roads were many other houses set close together. Other roads joined these chief highways like branches from the limb of a tree, so that a greater city had grown up outside the walls than within them.

"As we traveled along the road from the north, more people gathered about to see me and at a word from Canich, I parted the curtains of my palanquin that they might satisfy their curiosity. While we were still some distance from the city, we saw great numbers journeying from all directions toward Zacna. For not within the memory of living man had anyone from outside been permitted to enter the kingdom; so there was great excitement and curiosity.

"As we drew near the north gate of the city, we were met by a large and well-trained guard arranged in ranks, who brought greetings from the king and marched before us into the city. There were also the king's shouters, and their shouts and praises were all for him—'King of *Luumilkay,* and ruler of the City of Zacna.' Thus they sang:

" 'Ruler of the Land of the Deer, we praise thee;
Father of thy people from the Land of Fire, we hail thee;
Punisher of all who fail to do thee honor, we supplicate thee!
The heat of thy breath in anger melts the rocks;
Thine enemies crawl into the caves and die!'

"And much besides over and over. The thousands of people that awaited our coming and had left but a narrow passage for the palanquins took up the chant until the air was filled with their shouting. It was a welcome of great noise and one not easily forgotten.

"Seen thus in great numbers, it was not to be doubted that these people were true Mayas, though taller than the Mayas of the north and they walked with more grace and freedom, especially the women, who wore ornaments of gold and garments of many colors. Their hair was straight and black—though some heads were of a lighter color. Most of the faces were more narrow than those of the Maya Indians one sees in the settled parts of Yucatan—more like unto my own—with large prominent noses and curved somewhat; their lips full, not thick, and of pleasing lines. You have but to recall the faces of the kings and priests cut in stone and painted upon the monuments and walls of the Temple of the Bas Relief in Chichen Itza,* to see the people of Zacna as I did on that day. And as the ancient people of the City of the Sacred Well were Mayas, so were they of *Luumilkay,* and so, *batab,* without a doubt am I a Maya, for I am like unto both.

"Thus when the people of Zacna beheld me, they saw a man like unto themselves, strange only in his attire. Yet, what they thought of me was covered by a mask of quiet dignity as I passed through their midst, though perchance they had much to say when I had passed from their sight.

"When we came to the wide, open space in the center of the city, about which were the mightiest of the tem-

*Chichen Itza, also called the City of the Sacred Well, ninety miles south of Merida, the Capital of Yucatan, was the holy city of the Empire of Mayapan, now being restored by the Carnegie Institution and the Mexican Government.—EDITOR.

ples, we passed beneath a noble arch standing alone, the highest and widest I have ever seen, and even more beautiful than the Arch of Labna, the meaning of which I did not know. It was carved on all its sides with figures of warriors and priests as large as living men. Later, was I told that it had been set up in honor of a great victory in war.

"*Batab,* I have not words to tell you of the feelings which filled me as I was carried like a royal one in a gilded palanquin through the crowded streets of Zacna, and was set down at last before the great stairway leading up the pyramid where stood a wonderful temple to *Kukulcan,* the feathered serpent of the west.

"I felt like a man in a dream, or, as if by some strange magic, I had gone backward through time for fifty *katuns* or, as you say, a thousand years. Here was such a city as I had often seen deserted and destroyed, now in its glory and splendor and filled with its own people.

"At the foot of the stairway stood a huge stone image holding in its hands the sign of the heavens; and midway up was another with a wondrous headdress. As in all the ruined temples I had seen, at either side of the steps the body of a stone serpent ran its full length upwards, the heads of the serpents with yawning mouths and tongues at the foot, and ending in tails with many rattles at the top.

"The front of the temple was carved with many figures of the gods and symbols so that there was not a plain space upon it. Above this was a stone lattice-work, ponderous looking, but at such a height that it seemed to hang from the very heavens. It was not the pyramid, the stairway, the images, the temple, that filled me with wonder—for all these things had I seen before, as I

have seen them many times since—but to see them all in place and in use by men of the race that had builded them—that was the wonder.

"The shouters had formed into two lines facing each other, and between them Canich led me to the stairs, down which now came the *holpop,* or master of ceremonies, to meet us. The manner of the *holpop's* greeting was but another proof to me of the high rank of my captor; and this filled me with joy, for he had shown himself to be my friend.

"Up the broad stairway the *holpop* led us to the terrace at the top. Of three arches was the main doorway and on each side were images of *Kukulcan,* the god of the west. Like the temples you have seen in ruins, there was also a doorway at each end, but these I could not see from where I stood. On either side of the images of the god was a guardhouse, and before each stood a warrior at attention, a broad stabbing spear decorated with flowing ribbons in his right hand, a round shield with gold-embossed center on his left arm. Before the door of the temple two single ranks of warriors faced each other; and as we passed between them, their voices joined with the shouters below and their spears clashed upon their shields as we entered, followed by the loud praises of their king. He must indeed be a mighty ruler, I thought.

"We climbed another staircase within the temple to another terrace and were led by the *holpop* along a passage where sat aged priests, crying as we passed: 'Be humble, all who enter here! Be humble!'

"So did they warn us against pride of wealth and power in a place that spoke of little else, while from without there came the voices of the soldiers and the shouters singing the glory and royal titles of the king.

Other priests, both young and old, all richly dressed, passed us and bent upon me curious glances as they hurried by. Little did they practice the humility preached by the old priests who now took no part in the serving of their gods. Richly clothed, well fed, proud and haughty, they even recognized Canich's higher rank in a manner that seemed to carry polite hostility. When I sensed this hatred between the priests and nobles, I felt less of safety as a friend of Canich.

"The *holpop* opened a door at the end of the passage and led us into a room where we were told to await the pleasure of the king. This room was of the length of a hundred hands, but less in width, with four small windows like crosses set up high in the wall at one side. In the center stood a large carved table of stone, its top cut from a single slab of a hand's width in thickness, and much decorated in colors. This table top rested on the heads and uplifted hands of twelve small, well-carved figures of *acuinicob,* or dwarfs. Copal incense burned upon a brazier of odd design, at one side of the table, and gave forth a heavy but pleasant odor. The seats were thick cushions of deerskin leather, and small mats woven in bright colors were scattered about the floor.

"On the walls were paintings of battle scenes and of processions of priests led by the god, *Itzamna,* who brought the Mayas—so it was believed—from the Land of the Smoking Mountain. Such colored drawings have you seen upon the temple walls in the City of the Sacred Well, and as I have seen in other ruined temples of the Itzas. Of a truth, I could not doubt that this people was a part of that people, my people, *batab,* marvelously preserved to this present time, living the same life, conducting the same ceremonies in this dis-

tant hidden valley, as in ancient times, by their forefathers.

"Scarcely had Canich and I seated ourselves when two *nacons,* or attendants, brought to us fruits, sweetmeats and jugs of *balche* wine. After we had eaten, the *nacons* perfumed us both with censers of burning incense. This, so Canich told me, was always the custom when one was to be presented to the king, or to anyone of royal birth. As the *nacons* left us, the *holpop,* master of ceremonies, entered and spoke with Canich:

" 'O Canich, Commander of Ten Thousand Warriors, the king bids me ask you if you and the stranger whom you have brought to him, being rested and strengthened, will now appear before him.'

"Since the request of a king, however politely phrased, is always a command, we arose at once and, leaving the ante-room, came by another corridor to a great curtain of gold lace, which the *tupiles* held aside, admitting us to a large inner court, more spacious than I have ever seen in all the ruined cities of Yucatan, save only that of the Court of the Thousand Columns in Chichen Itza. It was a square room with high-pointed ceilings, in the form of Mayan arches, supported by rows of columns. The floor was of *zaccab,* a hardened stucco, and of a pale red tint.

"But I paid little heed to these things at that moment, for all my attention was held by the scene before me. Never before had I beheld a scene of equal beauty and splendor. The room was crowded with the high-born of the kingdom. The golden helmets of the nobles, with crests from which flowed brilliant plumes wrested from the plumage of countless birds, and their gorgeous feather capes, dazzled my eyes. The noble ladies were garbed in a fashion not unlike that of other Maya

women, though their *huipiles* were of far finer texture and more gracefully draped than any I had seen before, caught up here and there with ornaments of gold and jade. Their *rebosas* were filmy as cobwebs and rivaled the rainbow in color.

"All this I saw with but a glance as the *holpop* moved toward the throne with a sign for us to follow. As we waited for him to precede us several paces, Canich cautioned me, 'Watch me closely and do as I do, not as the *holpop* does.'

"Midway of the distance, the *holpop* dropped to his knees and went forward on them to within forty hands of the throne, bowed his forehead to the floor and spoke words to which I gave little heed, for my whole attention was fixed upon the king and the two maidens who sat, one on either side of him.

"The king's manner as he listened to the *holpop,* was serious but not severe. He was dressed somewhat like his nobles, only more richly. His golden helmet was the shape of a tapier's head, and its many plumes descended near to the floor. His long hair was braided and tied at the end with a ribbon of cloth of gold. His skirt, or apron, hung from a wide gold belt and was of open mesh studded with pearls. His shirt was of pure white and his feather cape made of countless humming birds' feathers, was of such gorgeousness that there is nothing with which to compare it. In his hand he held a ceremonial *hulche* of gold inlaid with turquoise, symbol of authority and royalty, and behind him stood one who waved a fan of sky blue feathers above his head.

"But though he held my future in his hands, though I burned with eagerness to hear the reason for my presence there before him, I soon lost sight of him and all others about me, soon forgot my anxiety as to my own

fate, when my eyes beheld the beauty of the princesses, his daughters.

"Oah, *batab,* never before had I beheld such beauty in women! So that I longed for a thousand eyes that I might better drink it in. The maids were young and could not have passed their first *katun.* Tall and slender they were and with perfect forms. Alike in this they were; but in all else they differed. For, the one who sat on the king's right was fair, while she who sat at his left was dark.

"Suddenly I realized that the *holpop* had ceased speaking and Canich had moved forward a step, waiting for me to do likewise. So we walked forward side by side and sank upon one knee before the king, who instantly demanded from Canich an account of his journey, and a reason for his delay in returning to Zacna. He signaled for us to stand again, for which I was glad. I am one accustomed to obey orders, as well as to give them, but not to bend the knee to any man. And at but one other time in the days I spent in *Luumil-kay* was I required to do so.

"While Canich related to the king the details of his journey to Multun, of his finding me in the temple of *Kukulcan,* and all that happened on our return, I feasted my eyes upon the beauty of the two princesses, for I was now near enough to observe them closely.

"Remember that I was then young, *batab,* even as you; that I held little respect for kings, having but just returned from helping to dethrone one in my own country; and that to me in those days—aye, even today—a beautiful woman is a beautiful woman, and no less desirable though she dwell in a palace rather than a hovel.

"But she who sat on the king's right held my gaze

firmly. Of a dazzling fairness, like the faint light of a new dawn, her skin had the paleness of the lily and showed like snow against the golden embroidery of her *huipile*. With delicate touch had nature painted her cheeks with the hues of the garden's fairest roses. Her hair was like the pollen of the flowers in color, and so fine that spiders might have spun it. It was drawn into a knot at the back of her shapely head and tied with ribbons of gold lace. Her eyes were blue, but of that greyish color which shows either a strong character or great self-will.

"The dark princess, who was equally beautiful, was of the opposite type; with olive skin set off by the deep color of her lips—like the red of the pomegranate seed —and wide brown eyes with lashes black as night. Her hair, smooth and shining as polished jet, was parted in the center and drawn to a knot at her neck with scarlet ribbons. She sat with a thoughtful brow, listening to the words of Canich, and bore herself, it seemed to me, with greater dignity than her sister. I judged her to be one who, having decided upon her course of action, would not be lightly swerved from it. Though she commanded my greater admiration, the fair maid the more fascinated me because of her less serious manner.

"They were arrayed like the other ladies of the court, save that their sandals were made of the mottled skin of the coral snake with soles of thick felt—made of human hair, I later learned—while their *rebosos* were woven of thread spun of the down plucked from the breasts of many-colored birds. The fair sister's *huipile* was of a shade of blue like the sky on a clear day. That of the dark one matched the ripe red of the hibiscus flower. They wore no jewelry save each a delicate chain of gold about her neck, from which hung a

small gold medallion, bearing, so it proved, the royal insignia.

"So I stood, gazing at these two maids, so high above me in wealth and rank and power, and yet with a feeling that had the force of knowledge that in some way my fate was to be bound up with theirs, or at least, that through them my fate would be determined.

"The dark princess paid me no heed, save to glance at me from time to time as Canich spoke of me. But when I looked at the fair princess, and in sooth I found it hard to do aught else, I often found her boldly meeting my gaze and regarding me, so it seemed, with greater interest as Canich continued with his story.

"Although she was a king's daughter, yet was I a man—young and hot-blooded. I gave her look for look; and if she saw in mine admiration and desire, she read truly, and without resentment. Her eyes held my gaze with a hypnotism equaled only by that of the serpent over its victim. I did not know my standing in that assembly, or how I was, or was to be, regarded. But if she did not know, before Canich finished speaking, how she was regarded by me, she would have been no woman.

"At last, I heard Canich nearing the end of his tale: 'And so, O King, because of the length and hazards of the journey, of its adventures and misadventures, of the nearly fatal illness of this brave man who risked his life to save mine from the jaguar's teeth and claws, who provided food when we were hungry—for such reasons only, have I been delayed in fulfilling your command. Here he stands, a mighty warrior from the north, commander of many warriors, victorious in a war to drive a foreign invader from his land. His name is Ahmen, showing he is wise. It might have been

Chichuinic, showing he is strong; or Ahlom, a fighter with the spear; or Ahkancoh, Yellow Jaguar, since he rules the jaguar tribe. Upon his thigh he bears the fresh scars of his latest conquest over it, when by his bravery, he saved my life.'

"The king looked at me, I thought, with approval. I looked at him and deemed him a man who might well have won my name—a man strong, capable and shrewd, yet kindly; not the type of the warrior, but one who holds his power by firmness of mind and keenness of judgment. I was amazed to hear him ask:

" 'Why, O Ahmen, did you desecrate the temple of the great god *Kukulcan,* in the ancient city of Multun, sleeping and cooking in its holy places. Have you aught to say in your defense?'

"His question was so unexpected that I was hard put to frame an answer. By his own words I knew that he had never before that day even heard of this ruined city where you and I now are; for the name he gave to it was the one I myself have made for it, by which Canich had spoken of it to the king. I knew that in asking this, he had a reason I could not fathom, and felt that much might depend upon my answer, for which I could not keep him waiting. So I made bold to say:

" 'Great King of *Luumilkay* and Ruler of the Glorious City of Zacna! When I entered the city of which you speak, all men had deserted it, leaving its buildings to fall in ruins, and its temples and shrines to be defiled by the wild creatures of the forest, by the birds of the air and by the foul reptiles that crawl upon the earth and dwell below its surface. Only in the temple of the mighty *Kukulcan* was there fit dwelling for a warrior, victor in many battles.'

" 'Know you not that it is unlawful for a foreigner

to build a fire where only the sacred fires of the Maya gods have burned?'

"To this I had no reply, for of a sudden, *batab,* it came to me, that I saw how unknowingly I had committed a crime against their religion. Was this the reason for my capture? I looked at Canich. His eyes would not meet mine and so I knew that not yet was he free to tell me why I had been brought to the city of Zacna, and thus before the king. I held this not against him, for he must make full report to his master. But his face was clouded with regret for the injustice of the questions that had been asked me and I knew that his loyalty to the king was now tempered with a desire to repay my kindness in saving his life. So the thought strengthened me, for Canich was a man of no little importance among his people. I felt sure that he could and would aid me. Had he not called me friend? Had I not found him, though a man of few words, one whose voice was listened to with great respect? Therefore, did I bow to the king's next words with less fear.

" 'O Ahmen, I perceive that you are a man of subtle mind and ready speech. Your words shall be duly weighed. Until such time as your wound has fully healed and you are rested from the journey, I give you into the custody of Canich and his house. Then shall you appear before us again and hear the decision of the councilors.'

"With these words, he dismissed us and we withdrew from the court. I wondered what was hidden in the meaning of his words, but I was involved in questions and customs of which I had no understanding, and I could only trust in Canich's friendship for me."

CHAPTER XII

"THE house of Canich was a haven of rest, far enough from the city to be free from its noise. I found it much like the houses in Merida, *batab,* formed like a square surrounded by a high wall with a patio in the center where there was a natural *cenote* or well from which water was lifted to a bathing pool above. The front, or main part of the house, was but one story high; the tall, peaked roof was thatched with palms to protect the inside of the house from the heat of the sun. Its length was about three hundred hands but its depth not more than sixty, forming two long, narrow rooms with an entrance-way between them.

"In the patio grew fruit and shade trees, vines and flowers of all colors and odors, in great profusion. From a large tank above the ground, water was carried through earthern pipes to all parts of the house and garden. In this place of quiet and comfort, I remained for many days, well cared for by Canich's mother and his young sister, Nicte, to whom he had brought the baby jaguar. Of Canich I saw little; for he left the house early in the morning, returning not until the sun no longer lighted the earth.

"Every third day, too, Nicte was absent from one morning until the next; and I was interested to learn that on those days she was one of the waiting women to the two princesses.

"She was sweet and very youthful, this sister of Canich's, small in every way, with movements like those of a bird. She seemed never to be still. She ap-

peared to be but a child, but little went on in the court or the kingdom that escaped her, so I found when I had gained her confidence. This I did by taking much interest in her pets, of which she had several.

"I needed not to urge Nicte to talk of the two princesses, for they were ever first in her thoughts and affections. She would talk of them by the hour and about the other ladies-in-waiting, of the *huipiles* they embroidered with the delicate work of the counted threads, with spinning and weaving, and of their laughter and gossip as their hands kept busy—in the manner of women since time began.

"From Nicte, I learned that the two sisters, though so different in appearance and nature, were twins. Ixkan, the fair maid, was older than Ixlol, the dark one, but by the space of one hour. Their mother had died while they were children, but the names she had bestowed upon them described them well. Ixkan means the fair one; Ixlol means the flower.

"Nicte questioned me as to which one I admired the more; and when I would not say—knowing how quickly she would carry my words to the palace—she laughed and told me it was no secret that I had gazed longer upon Ixkan than upon Ixlol when I stood before the king. 'And yet,' she added with a gleam of mischief, 'it is Ixlol who listens more eagerly and asks more questions when I tell them about you.'

"Then, more soberly, Nicte told me that Canich, her brother, loved Ixlol with a hopeless love, because she had been betrothed in childhood to Nohkeh, Great Deer, the only son of the king of Lacan, another country hemmed in by the same mountains that separated Zacna from the outside world.

" 'And how does Ixlol feel about it?' I asked. 'Does she love Canich or Nohkeh?'

" 'It would not seem from her words that she loves Nohkeh. But it has been a long time since he visited Zacna. When it pleases him, he will come to claim her for his bride.'

" 'You mean that she loves Canich?'

" 'That I cannot tell you because I do not know. Ixlol feels bound to Nohkeh by her father's pledged word and she knows well that his word is never broken. So she makes the best of what she cannot help and says that for the good of her country she must obey him.'

"I felt great sympathy for Canich and hoped that the prince of Lacan would break off the betrothal so that my friend might have the happiness he desired. Thus were my thoughts turned even more toward the fair princess, yet I feared to ask more about her, lest Nicte might carry reports of my interest to her.

"But on a later day, when I had fully recovered my strength and knew that I must soon appear again before the king, I could no longer keep silent.

" 'How is it,' I asked, 'that the younger of the two princesses, rather than the elder, is betrothed to the Prince of Lacan? Is Ixkan promised to the prince of some more powerful kingdom?'

" 'Not she!' laughed Nicte. 'To the eldest daughter of the king, when there is no son, is given to choose her own husband. And Zacna and Lacan are the only two kingdoms that we know. Now, of course, we see there must be another—the one from which you came. Canich told me not to question you about it, but Ixkan has been coaxing me to ask you where it is and what it is like, and to learn if you are a prince or only a noble.'

" 'And why should a princess show such interest in a passing stranger?'

" 'Just because you are a stranger, for one thing—the only one who ever came to Zacna. And if you are a prince, perhaps—who knows? She might choose you for her husband,' and Nicte's eyes twinkled merrily.

" 'And why should she do that?' I managed to ask with a casualness I did not feel.

" 'Well, it would be an unusual experience to marry a prince from a country of which no one had ever heard, even if it would not be for long.'

" 'And why not? Is not marriage for life in Zacna?'

" 'Oh, yes! but when one life is to be so short, how can the marriage be longer?'

" 'Is Ixkan then ill?' I gasped in amazement. 'Does she expect soon to die?'

"Nicte looked at me queerly. 'Of course not. But you do! Surely you know why my brother brought you hither—that you are to be honored by sacrifice to Yum Chac, god of rain!' "

Ahmen paused in his narrative, long enough to roll another cigarette and to moisten his throat with a few sips from the cup which Lupe, springing out of the background, placed in the old man's groping fingers.

"That must have been an unpleasant shock to you," observed Cranton. "Rather a casual way of announcing your death sentence. Your little friend, Nicte, didn't seem much disturbed about it."

"No, *batab,* she did not, and for a moment I thought she spoke in jest; but there was a sincerity in her tone which made me know she spoke the truth. I decided that for the moment it was best for me to take it as lightly as she did, and save my real thoughts for Can-

ich, who now appeared to me as a false friend who had betrayed me. So I replied:

" 'Oh, that! of course,' I said casually, 'but I did not know that anything had been definitely settled. I have heard no more about it.'

" 'Well,' said Nicte, 'that is because nothing has been definitely settled. But it soon will be. There is much debate among the priests and nobles, whether or not the honor should be given to one not of our country—a stranger. Of course, you are not a stranger to us; you are already like one of our family. To Canich you are as a brother—' and she looked at me with a shy little smile—'of course, his brother would be my brother, too.'

" 'Yet, feeling that way toward me, you would not be sorry to have me killed?'

" 'Killed? Oh, yes! But not to have you honored with the sacrifice. I—we all—should miss you, but I could only rejoice that you had been chosen to carry our petition to the god of rain, the greatest honor that could be received by mortal man.'

"By this I perceived how strong was the religion of these people. But all I said was that I had no wish to stir up trouble in the kingdom and that I would willingly grant this honor to a native of Zacna. 'Besides,' I told her, 'the God who is worshiped in my country does not require the death of those who serve him. It would not please him to have me sacrificed to another god. Nor, would it please me.'

"Nicte must have spoken of my words to Canich, for he came to me the next morning as I sat in the patio trying to think of some way to escape this honor of sacrifice. His face was troubled and for some time he did not speak. At last he said:

" 'Is it true that you do not worship our gods, but another of whom I never heard?'

" 'It is true,' I answered. 'Still *Hunabku* must be the same god who is everywhere and who is your supreme deity, but would Yum Chac heed a prayer brought to him by an unbeliever? No! I should be sacrificed to no purpose; perchance the anger of the god would even be the greater and added suffering would come to your people.' I spoke with all my force, *batab,* and I was glad to see that Canich seemed much impressed.

" 'True,' he replied slowly. 'There might be such danger. The matter must be well weighed, but I, being a soldier, know not the answer. It is a question for the priests. If you know not the gods of Zacna, you cannot understand the honor that would be yours in the sacrifice. It is one that any noble of Zacna—and I as one of them—would welcome gladly. But I shall oppose your sacrifice because, to you, it would not be an honor. For I know it is not fear of death that moves you. Did you not risk your life for me, a stranger, and nearly lose it? For that, there is no return too great for you to ask of me that is in my power to grant.

" 'Of course, I believe that you are wrong to place your trust in your strange god, for he cannot be greater than ours. A god who asks no sacrifices can only be one too feeble to demand them. This you would learn if you lived longer with us, which I hope to make possible.'

" 'But tell me,' I demanded, 'if to be sacrificed to your gods is so great an honor, how is it that you were sent upon a long journey to bring me for the sacrifice?'

" 'To give you the understanding for this, you must know the words of our ancient books—that when our people first entered this valley to build this city, they

found a wild and savage tribe called Lacans. They had darker skins than did our people, were fewer in number and were not well armed. These were easily conquered. Some were captured and forced to aid in building the city; the rest were driven back into another part of the valley separated from this by a narrow pass between two high and rocky hills. Intermarriage with this tribe was forbidden, and those who broke the law were driven out and compelled to live with the Lacans, which improved their race. This was a mistake of the first rulers, for though at first in this way was the blood of the Itzas of Zacna kept pure; in the passing of many *katuns,* the blood of the Lacans became much improved. From the Itzas who went to live among them and from those of their people who lived in Zacna, they learned much of our ways and soon built a city like unto our own and governed by laws like unto ours.' "

The old man eased himself into his hammock, rolled another cigarette and resumed the story:

"Canich told me that the people of Zacna were a peaceable people but were forced to defend themselves when attacked, so were compelled to keep an army in readiness. Finally came a great battle which nearly swept away the two kingdoms.

" 'This,' said Canich, 'was at the beginning of the reign of the brother of the present king. He was sorely wounded and his health broken. He lived for only the space of a few more years, and his one desire was to restore prosperity to the kingdom, and to prevent further warfare between the two countries. Cocom, his younger brother, thought with him; but Ekchan, his son, who had been too young to fight in the great battle, was hot-blooded and reckless and his one great

ambition was to lead an army into Lacan and lay it waste, at whatever cost to Zacna.

" 'So, when the king knew that death was upon him, he named his brother, Cocom, his successor, rather than Ekchan, his son. And when Cocom became king, he made a pact with the king of Lacan that there should be no more war between the kingdoms while they reigned. And to seal that pact they arranged for a marriage between the son of the king of Lacan, and the second daughter of the king of Zacna, when the children should be of proper age.

" 'Some say that the king of Lacan would only agree to King Cocom's proposal on condition of this marriage, and that Cocom consented to it only for the sake of his people,' and Canich's voice now held such a note of sadness that I knew that Nicte had indeed spoken truly when she had declared her brother's love for Ixlol. He paused, and his eyes gazed as if he saw into a great distance.

" 'Thus was the matter settled and soon forgotten by all save a few, such as are ever found ready to oppose any king. Chief of these was Ekchan, who left the palace and retired to a large tract of land in the mountains which he claimed as a gift from his father. He took with him many who differed with the policy of the king and those who would rather fight than work and till the soil in peace, so that, as the years passed, great numbers drifted thither until a large company is now scattered over the mountainsides and in small hidden villages, so that no man may count them.

" 'When these shiftless and thriftless people first followed Ekchan into the hills, there was rejoicing in Zacna, for such folk are unpleasant neighbors; but they are now become a danger to the peace of the country,

for they obey no laws but their own, and steal from the farms of the thrifty citizens.

" 'Yet is Ekchan hated less than might be thought. He is of royal birth and the most powerful noble in the country. Some look to him to succeed Cocom and strive to keep in his good favor. Yet he is not powerful enough to lead an uprising against the king who has made himself strong in the confidence and affections of his people.

" 'And now do I come to that situation which concerns you. And you will see how closely Ekchan is concerned in it and why I have told you so much about him. Know then, that in this kingdom were two factions of almost equal power, each jealous of the other, each seeking the advantage of the other—the nobles and the priests. For as many *katuns* as we have record, the people have been taxed a tithe of all they produce to support the temples and priests, and only after that is paid have the nobles been able to take their share from the workers. But in years of drouth it often happens that when the temple tithes are paid, there is not enough left to feed the tillers of the ground, let alone provide aught for the nobles who own the land.

" 'So it came to pass that some of the lesser nobles turned their lands over to the temples and joined the priesthood, until now the priests are almost as many as the nobles and the wealth of the temples is so increased as to be almost as great as that of all the nobles and the king.

" 'The king is of the nobles, yet, being the king, he is also of the priesthood, standing next to Ahkin, the high priest, in the service of the gods. All the years of his reign has he striven to keep peace between the two factions and to do justice to both. There have been

times when only the wise judgments of the king have prevented warfare between them.

" 'From as long ago as there is memory or record, it has been the custom each year to send a human offering by the road of sacrifice to appease Yum Chac, god of rain; for such has been his demand, and to refuse it would bring drouth and calamity upon the land. Yet for several seasons he has shown displeasure at the offering by holding back the gift of rain so that famine and distress have come upon us. Even this season, as you have seen, the rain that fell so abundantly in the land from which you came and swelled the waters of the river by which we entered *Luumilkay,* so that it wrecked our *canoas* and drowned some of those that guided them, did not cross the mountains to refresh our lands and revive our wilting grain.

" 'This year, then, when the season brought no rain with it, Ahkin, the high priest, announced that the only hope of pleasing Yum Chac would be to send him a warrior of noble birth to plead with him to look with favor upon *Luumilkay.* The king approved the suggestion but held that one from the priesthood would be a more fitting messenger to the god.

" 'This word of the king's was approved by the nobles but opposed by the priests who declared that those whose duty it was to sacrifice should not be sacrificed, that to do so would be to kindle the anger of all the gods. Then the king asked Ahkin if it might not be agreeable to Yum Chac if a noble not of our own land were chosen. After consulting the stars for an omen, Ahkin announced that such a sacrifice would be pleasing if one of proper rank and valor could be found. Then did the king send me forth on that search, and the rest you know.'

"So spoke Canich, *batab,* and ere he had finished, I knew more than he had thought to tell me, and that was proved to me by what came to me by other tongues as time went on. The king, as I did, saw in this proposal to sacrifice one of the nobles, a shrewd move of Ahkin's to reduce their number by one and to start a series of sacrifices that would in time give the priests the greater power in the king's council.

"In order to get willing victims for the sacrifices, the priests for uncounted *katuns* had taught that to be sacrificed was the highest honor that could come to man or woman, an honor even greater than kingship; for kingship was an earthly honor which a man might lose by conquest or in other ways, while the honor of sacrifice was divine, bestowed by the gods and remaining with the chosen one throughout all eternity, bringing with it many other benefits not enjoyed by others who passed from this world to the next.

"Then, one day Canich announced. 'It is no longer wise to delay your coming before the council and the king. At an early hour tomorrow will you appear before them.' "

And, as though his mind had gone back to dwell once more upon that night of waiting, Ahmen stopped talking.

Cranton looked across to the opposite temple where the rest of the boys were gathered about their fire, some asleep, the others conversing drowsily. As he struck a match to light his *cigarro,* the wizard again took up the thread of his story.

CHAPTER XIII

"IT was as Canich had said. Next day, at the hour set, we appeared before the king and councilors, in that same court where we had been received on our arrival in the city, now several weeks past.

"On the throne sat the king, and on either side of him, three councilors. These six men shared with him the ruling of the nation; yet the king had the right to set at naught any decision made by them which did not please him. The priests were gathered on the right side of the throne; then some little space on either side was given up to many people of high enough rank to be bidden to the council.

"I noticed that no women were present—for had not my eyes gone directly to those empty seats at the right and left of the king, in my desire to look upon those whom I now knew by name—Ixkan and Ixlol? This matter then, seemed to be one in which women had no part.

"After the ceremony of our approach to the throne, the *holpop,* bowing first to the king as if seeking his permission to put the question to me, addressed me, saying: 'In the name of our king, the Mighty Ruler of *Luumilkay,* we command you to give true answer to our question: Why, O Stranger, did you build a fire in the holy temple of *Kukulcan* in the city of Multun?'

"As I had been instructed by Canich to speak only when he himself bade me do so, I now held back my words, while he answered for me, facing the king and the council, speaking in tones gentle but firm:

" 'Hear, O King and Councilors and priests of

Zacna! This man from the north is not guilty of any wrong-doing, since it was not known to him as unlawful to take shelter from the cold of night in the ruined temple of Multun. Therefore, I, who owe him my life, beg his of you, and ask that he be spared from the sacrifice; for I would take him as blood-brother and make him as one of our people!'

"At these words, *batab,* a mist rose before my eyes, like that which now shuts from our sight the outside world. Not alone would Canich save me from the hands of the priests but he would take me as blood-brother, so making their power against me as nothing.

"But plain was the look of disappointment written on their faces; a low murmur of voices arose from the councilors—a sound like the growing anger of the gods in the heavens—which spread to the nobles. As it grew, I seemed to read in it my doom. He whom I took to be Ahkin, the high priest, frowned upon me. Not without many words, I thought, would he put aside this opportunity of sacrificing to the gods a man from the north.

"The king turned to look for a moment upon me and his eye was kind as though he, for one, looked favorably upon me in this matter. Then, addressing the councilors, the priests and nobles, he said:

" 'This matter is now before us for decision. What say you? Shall this man be made as one of us through the ceremony of blood brotherhood, or do the gods demand him as a sacrifice?'

"Ahkin was first upon his feet. I knew he would be.

" 'Hear, O King and Councilors!' he cried. 'For what reason and cause was this stranger from the north brought among us?'

"So was the false charge of desecrating the temple

forgotten, *batab,* in this chief reason for my arrest. Anger arose within me, yet was I forced to hold my words and hear from the lips of Ahkin, the real cause of my having been brought to Zacna, even as Canich had already told it to me.

"The king and the councilors gave ready ear to his words. The nobles, as one man, leaned forward—as trees swayed by the wind from behind—that none of his argument be lost to them as he went on:

" 'Did we not, these two seasons past, choose a man, nobly born and without blemish, as fit sacrifice to the god of rain, praying that he would overturn upon the earth his great vase of life-giving water? And did he accept our offering? Nay! He holds back the rains, so that the crops wither and die, the fruit trees are barren, their burden is withered, their leaves no longer green. The people will soon cry aloud for food, to still the sufferings of their children!

" 'For this reason did we choose Canich, he who commands ten thousand warriors, to journey northward and bring from another land one in every way fit to be an offering for the god of rain; while the people sent up prayers that such a one would be sent across his path. And after many days, did he not return bringing with him this stranger from the north as answer to our prayers? Shall we now free him, thus bringing upon ourselves the sterner wrath of all the gods? Nay! I say, Canich has no voice in this matter. His plea should be set aside. Let this stranger be offered as a sacrifice, that the god of rain may look with favor upon us once more and the land be filled with plenty.'

"Strong words these, and they bore much weight with those assembled to decide my fate. Looking aside

at Canich, I saw anger written plain upon his face, yet he spake not.

"And now there was much discussion between the king, the councilors and the priests, the king acting as judge—as he is called in the courts of nations today. As they talked, I watched them closely, so that it soon became plain to me that two parties were formed to decide this matter—the king alone on my side, while the councilors and the priests, with Ahkin as their speaker, took the other. The councilors, being religious men and more than a little afraid of the power of the priests, stood with them.

"Seeing this, and knowing too, that the king looked upon me, during this discussion, not unfavorably, Canich stepped forward and addressed him:

" 'I crave a word with you most royal king, keeper of the nine holy cities of your forefathers and of the four *bacabs* who support the earth. There is one here who has set aside my power and the voice of my argument. Yet, am I not headman to you, O king, and commander of ten thousand warriors, even as Ahkin himself has said? I would have you know that these warriors are ready to fight at my word and they now stand with me in this matter for the life of this man.'

"At this, the murmuring among the councilors and priests broke forth anew. For the first time I noticed that some of the nobles nearest Canich favored his speech. These were the friends he had persuaded to support him in this battle of words for my life and with a measure of comfort did my eyes rest upon them.

"Then the king, a little weary of the ceaseless talking of the council and priests, called for silence.

" 'Let this matter be put to the vote!' he commanded.

"This was done, the vote of the council and priests being first taken. Even among them, I was amazed to find not a few who had changed toward me and raised their hands in my favor. But the greatest number were with Ahkin for my sacrifice. Then was the vote put to the nobles. Here I fared better, so that the number for and against me was equal.

"Still were both the votes of Canich and the king to be taken and now, in his fear for my life, Canich spoke with but little wisdom and undue haste:

" 'Before you cast your vote, O King, I desire that the warriors standing without the court, place themselves on opposite sides, for and against this man. Thus may we pass to the side of those with us, should your vote be against him; for I, who have already claimed him as blood-brother, will not desert him, whatever the decision.'

"Much as his words warmed my blood, I knew that for the first time since our meeting, Canich spake without wisdom, yet was it plain to me that his speech bore weight with the nobles, and that his warriors would stand with him should this matter lead to strife.

"But the king rose from his throne, his face flushed with anger.

" 'Am I the king?' he cried. 'How knew you that my vote was not to be for this stranger? Yet now that you voice these words of strife, do I cast it against him!'

"Then did a great noise and confusion arise. It looked as though blows might be struck, until Canich, raising his hand, shouted above the din:

" 'Hold! There is yet my vote to be cast, and in placing it against the king's it makes the matter once more even. One more vote, then, must yet be cast and

this should be done by one in whose veins flows the blood of royalty.'

"Now there was a moment of silence while the king looked about him at the nobles and upon the warriors at the far end of the court. I could see that he knew well the favor in which Canich was held by them and that it would not be wise to speak too strongly before them against his headman. So, turning to the council, he said:

" 'There are yet two of the royal house, and one of them may vote. Send, therefore, and bring my daughters at once to the council!'

"And now, *batab,* my knees shook under me like willows in a great wind. I can be a brave man among men; but for my fate to lie in the hands of a woman, whose mind changes more often than do the seasons in the space of one year, robbed me of all courage. Yet had it not been for these thoughts, I would have desired nothing more than to look once again upon the princesses, chiefly the fair one.

"Soon they entered the court, to take their places at each side of the king. Ixkan came first, her body swaying sinuously as she walked with the grace of a proud female jaguar. Ixlol followed, her dark head held proudly high, her step firm.

"When they had taken their places, the king explained the reason for their presence; then turned to Ixkan, saying:

" 'To you, my elder daughter, as befits your station, is given the first word. Think well before you speak, for in your decision lies the fate of this stranger.'

"At his words, Ixkan turned her beautiful blue eyes upon me and for a moment gazed widely upon my every feature. The light from them fairly blinded me, *paal*

batab, and I thought that there would even be sweetness in being condemned to the sacrifice by such a wondrous maid. She opened her mouth as though she were about to speak, but seeming to feel the baleful expressions upon the faces of the councilors, she turned toward them and something drew the words back from her lips. She looked next at me and then at the king, her father. The interest left her face and a look of hesitation passed over it.

"Finally she spoke and, though her lips trembled, all could hear her voice:

" 'O my father, you seek to place upon me a grave responsibility. Armed men holding different opinions are standing on either side. If I should cast my vote to please one, then would I be in disfavor with the other. I like it not these warriors who hold their spears in readiness to strike if my vote should not satisfy either side. Therefore, my father, I would withhold my vote. Let my sister speak for him, if she will!'

"Now all eyes went to Ixlol. She looked first at her sister and on her face was pictured more than a little mockery for one who would thus falter on the decision of a man's life, or so it seemed to me, and I, too, looked upon Ixkan, though there was no judgment in my gaze for her; for gladly, even then, would I have been sacrificed had she so asked—yes, and gone loving her! Even then I knew it, though I had looked upon her but twice. My eyes dwelt on her, while my ears heard the words of the king to Ixlol:

" 'Speak, my daughter, and decide this matter.'

"The dark maid rose from her seat and with head thrown back, looked fearlessly upon the council and the nobles and spake in firm, clear tones:

" 'I cast the deciding vote in favor of this man from

the north. Let him be spared the sacrifice and be received among us as one of our people.'

"As her words ceased, there was a rumbling sound, a heavy darkness filled the room and there followed such a crash of thunder that it seemed as if the very heavens would be rent asunder. As though to set his great seal of approval upon the length of my life here on this earth, the greatest god of these people, *Hunabku,* had spoken to the god of rain with a voice of thunder and lightning; the heavens opened and poured upon the dry ground the waters of life and growth. All who were present at the council to decide my fate took this as an omen in my favor and the murmur of voices again arose, this time with a note of rejoicing.

" 'The gods have spoken!' Ixlol solemnly exclaimed.

"Without more delay, the king held up his hand for silence while he declared this matter now settled for all time by the vote of the Princess Ixlol. He gave me once more into the care of Canich until the ninth day thereafter, when the ceremony of blood-brotherhood would take place.

"So the meeting ended; and the council, the priests and the nobles arose and went their ways. As for me, I acted by the impulse which prompted me, and later learned that by the grace of the gods, I had done what custom demanded. I advanced to the Princess Ixlol and kneeling before her, took the outstretched hand she offered me and held it to my forehead, thanking her humbly for her vote cast in my favor. She did not speak, but the look she bent upon me was filled with silent meaning. I knew that at some later time she would most surely demand of me a return for the life she had given that day.

"As I arose, my eyes went to the Princess Ixkan who

had been watching us, looking first at her sister, then at me. A frown disturbed her smooth white forehead, and the lines of her mouth were firm set. Was there already a feeling of jealousy between the two for my favor, I wondered, remembering Nicte's words.

"A power, too strong to resist—like that which draws all things to the earth—drew me to her and dropping upon one knee, I took her hand and held it to my forehead, even as I had done with that of her sister's, while I besought her:

" 'O Princess royal, I desire not to live long in doubt as to whether your vote be for or against me; so from this day on shall I strive to be worthy, that you may favor my acceptance into the kingdom.' My heart beat quickly within me as I awaited her reply.

"When, after a silence that seemed to me without measure, I looked up, it was to see her smiling—a smile that was neither wholly warm with promise, nor yet did it take from me all hope; it left me wondering. When she spoke, her words were like unto the smile.

" 'I withhold my vote, Ahmen, for this meeting. At some future time, when I desire your presence, we shall speak of it again.'

"She said no more, but her words went with me. When I dwelt on that future meeting—as I did often in the days that followed—my heart leaped with a strength that bade fair to release it from inward bondage.

"The evenings, Canich and I spent in various ways. Often we sat in the cool of the patio, talking of many things—mostly was I the eager listener. Now and then the evening stillness would be broken by the soft voice of Canich's mother, or the ringing laughter of his sister, Nicte, as she played with and teased the young

jaguar, bringing from it feeble little growls of protest.

"Every night at about the hour of seven, *batab,* would sound the evening drum. This giant drum with a snakeskin head, which stood in the temple of Education, to the south of the temple of *Kukulcan,* was beaten to give forth sounds, which, to every learned Itza, were words of a language he understood. In time, I too, could read them.

"Just as the telegraph stations of the modern white man sends forth their messages, so did the beating of this drum give to the people the news and happenings of that day, all over the land of *Luumilkay.* The language of the drums was taught to the young in their schools of learning, so that when they grew to manhood, they were able to read its message." Ahmen's voice ceased.

It was with reluctance that Cranton must now return from the ancient land of the Mayas, but he appreciated that the old man had talked with few interruptions; and it was now past noon. So they ate their noon-day meal, which Lupe prepared in an incredibly short time. Like Cranton, he was all too eager for the wizard to resume his tale.

For awhile thereafter, they smoked in silence; and the smoke rising from Cranton's pipe formed a screen on which there appeared to him pictures of that intriguing past of Ahmen's. And, as those mind pictures became startlingly real to the dreamer, they seemed to force themselves upon the attention of the narrator, pleading to be explained. At last he threw away his *cigarro* and began:

CHAPTER XIV

"ON the ninth day after I had last appeared before the king and the council, came the ceremony of blood-brotherhood and my adoption into the tribe of Mayas of *Luumilkay*.

"From the wealth of his many wardrobes, Canich supplied me with clothes befitting the occasion, and when he had been dressed in similar attire to my own, except that he wore a mantle of the royal bird, the *quetzal,* we set out for the temple of *Kukulcan,* where the ceremony was to take place. This time, however, it was open to the gaze of the people, which was rightly so, since I was to be received as one of them. They lined the great stone stairway, leading up to the platform, at the center of which was placed the throne. On either side of it were seats for the princesses, while those for the nobles were to the right and left of it, as before.

"Ahkin and the other priests awaited us on our arrival at the foot of the steps, but the king and his daughters were yet to appear.

"Slowly we ascended the wide stairway, suiting our steps to the sound of the music of horns and drums; at so slow a pace that I was able to look closely, once more, upon these people amongst whom I had come. I saw many men of my own size and appearance with straight features, save that their noses were like those of the people you call Hebrew. Ladies there were with skins of a dazzling whiteness and hair of the color of ripe corn, while others of an equal beauty, had complexions of a darker hue and black hair. These Mayas,

then, I discovered, were a people of two different types, as were some of those of my own country.

"As we reached the top of the steps and paused before the throne, the music of the drums and horns ceased.

"Now came the king, leading by the hand his daughter, Ixkan, her sister following them. As they circled around and took their seats, my eyes were fixed upon the Princess Ixkan, though she gave me no look in return. Behind them came the serving maids, and from Nicte, who came first, did I receive a look that was filled with soft meaning, though such as a sister would bestow upon a brother, which I was soon to be.

"Well was it that I had been fully schooled in the order of the ceremonials, for this was to be one of no little importance.

"When we had saluted the king and cried aloud his titles, he arose and, looking upon me, spake:

" 'You, who came to us a stranger from the north, are now to have bestowed upon you by the people of the land of *Luumilkay,* a great honor; that of casting from you the years of your life now past, and taking on a new and better life as one of the great Itzamna tribe, who came first from over the big water, from the Land of the Smoking Mountain. Should you be found worthy of it, you will be raised to the height of the great lords of this land; but never must you seek to depart from this land, under penalty of instant death, should you do so.

" 'Now, Ahmen, what say you to all of this? Is it as Canich, your blood-brother-that-is-to-be, has said: Are you to be trusted in honesty and loyalty? Do you stand ready to swear loyalty to the king of the land of *Luumilkay* and to his two daughters, one of whom may

some day be its queen? If so, kneel you before us. Let the words of your mouth speak that which is in your heart.'

"I knew, *batab,* that I must utter words which would not be satisfying to my soul, for I had always been free in my own country, and desired to be ever so, to do as I willed and go where I would. Now was loyalty asked of me to one country forever, and one that I might not like so well. Yet if I desired to live, I knew the answer that would be required of me. Therefore, dropping to one knee before the throne, I spake:

" 'O King, Ruler of the Land of *Luumilkay,* to you and to the Royal Princesses, do I swear loyalty, and to this country and its people forever. Your trust in me will be rewarded, even as my blood-brother-to-be has said. For all that you may bestow upon me, as you believe me worthy of it, do I even now give you thanks and make promise always to hold myself fit to keep it.'

"After I had said these words, there was a vast silence. For a time none spake, but I could hear, as though it were the blowing of wind through the tops of tall trees, the movement of the people behind me. It was a peaceful sound, so that I knew my words had pleased them.

"Next, the book of the laws of the Mayas was called for, and Ahkin, the high priest, read aloud from it the form of adoption into this tribe and the ceremony of blood-brotherhood. He read so that all might hear and know that what followed would surely be in accord with the custom of their land.

"Ahkin then called for the court surgeon who, opening a vein in the arm of Canich and likewise of myself, let out a quantity of blood from each, which was caught within a vase and allowed to mix. While this was done,

we bared the upper part of our bodies to receive it again.

"When all was ready, the servant of the high priest dipped a feather brush of the *toh* bird's tail into the vase of blood and with it painted our bodies in stripes, starting always from the heart and going to all points therefrom. As he did so, and while our bodies drew in the blood, the high priest declared a solemn vow, to which we must both give answer:

" 'Now do I call upon the gods of *caaen,* the heavens above, and those below the earth, and upon the One Great Unseen God, *Hunabku,* to look upon this adoption of a stranger into the Maya nation and of the blood-brotherhood between these two men. Thus do I cover each with holy stripes of his own blood and the blood of the other; the blood that has descended from the great father of all laws, *Itzamna,* and has run in the veins of all his children from the first until this day of the twelfth cycle. Now will you both join hands and declare your understanding of this oath.'

"So did we do as he asked and joining hands, took the vow. But for me alone was the next vow. Standing squarely before the king, I repeated these words as Ahkin spoke them:

" 'May every torment enter my soul; may I live in everlasting fire; may my body be filled with worms and my days with sorrow, should I, at any time, forget but the smallest part of my oath. I swear to be loyal to the king and to his house as long as they shall rule this land, and to my blood-brother so long as he shall live. In time of warfare, I swear to stand at the side of the king and his royal house, to die for them if such be the need. Forsaking all whom I have left in another coun-

try, I swear to obey the gods of this land and this do I swear by all the gods of the earth.'

"This was a solemn oath indeed, *batab,* for one who had always felt that the world was his to walk in. Now had I taken a vow to remain in one country for all time and to live faithfully to its gods only. Yet there came over me a peace as I spake the words after Ahkin. They filled my thoughts, so that I heard and saw nothing else until the ceremony was ended.

"Then the king arose and presented me to the people as one of them: the silence that followed his words, best expressing their agreement to receive me into their nation.

"He then departed with his daughters, their serving maids and the royal guards while the royal band of horns and drums played a song of praise. The people went their ways. The priests, led by Ahkin, went into the temple. And now, Canich and I, side by side, descended the great serpent stairway to the foot, where our palanquins awaited us, since our present appearance forbade us walking through the streets on foot. Many friends gathered at the house of Canich that night to celebrate our bond of brotherhood. Sounds of feasting, laughter and music filled the patio and garden until the early hours of another day.

" 'The Princess Ixkan bids you to her presence!' These words of magic I heard as I was about to take my departure from the palace after an audience with the king—the first he had granted me since the ceremony of my adoption into this nation. Within the space of one day after these ceremonies, the king had sent a bearer to the house of Canich commanding my presence at the palace. Receiving me in a small audience chamber

in company with the *holpop* and the *ahkulel,* the man of the law, to witness, he had a paper made out by the *ahkulel* which gave me the second in command of the army under Canich. His manner was grave as he also commanded me to see that my warriors were well schooled so they should not fail in even the smallest detail of military customs. A house he also bestowed upon me, close to that of Canich, with servants to wait upon my every need.

"Only to the voice of the king, himself, and to Canich was I beholden, and so great was my happiness that this indeed seemed no hard task.

"So had I left the king's presence, with the thought that my progress in matters of warfare was soon to be shown. On leaving, I stepped into a wide corridor. Its floor of blue-tinted stone slabs led the full length of one of the four sides formed by the buildings of the palace. At the other end of this hallway, I had learned, were the apartments of the princesses.

"I had walked half its length, when the words I have already spoken came to my ears and halted me. Turning, I beheld one of the serving maids of the Princess Ixkan, who stood before me awaiting my reply to her words. From Nicte, who upon this day was not at the palace, I had heard much of the nature of these maids and of the loyalty required of them, which would not change, nor yet sway, in the winds of circumstances. A closeness of tongue in all things was theirs.

"All this ran through my thoughts, in the space of a moment before I answered the maid, 'I will follow. Lead the way.' And as I followed her to the other end of the hallway my heart beat no less loudly than did my sandaled feet upon the polished stone of the floor, at the thought of what was before me. For days I had

anxiously awaited this promised summons to the presence of the fair princess, yet now that it was come, it seemed I would willingly have turned aside because of the sense of weakness that seized me at the thought of the greatness of this moment.

"At the far end of the hallway a warrior stood on guard between two doors, one on either side of him, so that it would seem there was no means of entrance from the apartment of one princess to the other.

"The maid admitted me to a room of fair length but small width with high pointed ceiling. Here she bade me to be seated and left through a door at one end of the room.

"I looked about me with no little curiosity. At the end of the room was an archway hung with long curtains of a rich golden color, shutting off from all view whatever lay back of them. Later I was to learn that they hid the bed chamber of the Princess Ixkan. Not far from the apartments and the bed chamber of Ixkan, were those of Ixlol. Nicte had told me of the deep love which had existed between the two sisters since childhood. Had I then known, *batab,* that I was to be the one who would divide that love, my actions would have been different and this story you would never have heard.

"Now that I had actually been bidden to the presence of her of the corn-colored hair and soft blue eyes, I waited with no little impatience for her to appear. I looked about the room, my eyes resting upon those things on which hers had rested many times. The floor of stone was colored to match the pale hue of the heavens, the high tapered ceilings and the walls were of an equal whiteness to that of the *zaccab* of the hills.

Mats made of the finest threads of henequin lay on the floor and none disturbed the harmony of its coloring.

"So I stood, gazing upon it all, when a voice of wondrous softness aroused me from my musings.

" 'Welcome, Ahmen,' it said.

"I turned to face the Princess Ixkan. She extended her hand to me and this time, being alone with her, I carried it, not to my forehead, but dropping on one knee as I took it in mine, I placed my lips lightly upon it. For just the length of a *toh* bird's call. She withdrew it slowly, as I rose to face her.

"With a movement that had in it much of grace, she seated herself on another low couch of great richness, having gold feet formed of serpents heads, putting some of the cushions aside and arranging others to suit her comfort. Sidewise, her eyes flashed a look at the empty space on the couch, and for a moment it seemed as though I might be bidden to sit beside her, for now she lifted her eyes to my face.

"As though it were a book must she have read my thought and the light in my eyes that came from the hope within me, for then she did a thing which showed me that in all women are many things alike: even as their hearts speak one thought, is another upon their lips. Her eyes bade me sit beside her, yet with what seemed more firm intent, she gracefully waved to a cushioned seat near by. And here I sat, silent before her, awaiting her word. After a short space of time she smiled upon me, thereby causing my heart to behave even more unseemly, and spoke:

" 'Tell me, Ahmen, of that great country from whence you came. Who is king there? Know you the princess? Is she beautiful? And are there others as fair?'

"Now in truth had I much to answer, and not words to tell it all. But speech she demanded of me and, therefore, I began to tell her of that land to the north which gave me birth, its people and customs—in many things like those of her own country—of my work as guide to the white men who came from even farther north to learn what they could of our ancient temples and cities of the south.

"But not one word did I speak of womankind. What did I, a man among men, know of them, save only that blessed mother who bore me and now dwelt in the ninth heaven?

"Yet it seemed that of all the questions she put to me, this was the one Ixkan most desired to have answered for, without warning did she stop my tongue in the midst of words, to say in tones that held a little of impatience:

" 'All that you say interests me, since for long have I desired to talk with one whose words have meaning. I grow weary of those who talk much, yet say little. But you tell me nothing of the maids in that land to the north, and of them I would hear. Are there some as fair as I?'

" 'Princess,' I answered, 'I who have known and lived much among men and am at my comfort only in their presence, can speak little of women. All my days have the thoughts of men been greatest in me. And now, in this, your land of my adoption, have I, by the grace of the king, been placed second in command of the army, so that my mind is now occupied with the matters of warfare—'

" 'Cease!' her voice bade me sharply; and mine, which had been growing bolder as I spake of these things which ever loosed my tongue, died away like an

echo that fills the valley and then is lost in the hills forever.

" 'I would not hear of these things,' she told me, her voice impatient, but yet showing nothing of anger. In all the days I dwelt in the city of Zacna—and often during this time did I see the princesses, learning much of their natures—seldom did I see the coldness of the fair maid broken by the heat of anger and passion, such as her sister Ixlol revealed. To my sorrow, was I later to learn that this very coldness can inflict more deadly a wound than can the quick heat of an angry flame.

" 'It is of you I wish to speak,' her voice continued. 'Else whyfore should I summon you hither?' and she bent upon me the sweetness of her smile. 'Tell me, were you a great captain and nobleman in your own country, and might you not by force of arms even have become king, had you remained there?'

" 'Nay, most royal Princess, such would not be my ambition, for it is my desire to dwell in peace and freedom as a subject, rather than in doubtful security as a ruler of men.'

" 'Yet you love that power which you possess, Ahmen. Else why your position as commander in your king's army? Then, if some power be acceptable to you—why not greater power?'

" 'Yea, power insofar as I am worthy to receive it —but not by force of arms and by strategy.'

" 'Then, such power, but honorably bestowed, would be acceptable to you, Ahmen,' she smiled with a slow smile full of a meaning which was gone ere I could read it. Then, quickly her words changed and as she sat upright, her tiny sandaled feet tapped the floor, like the patter of dried leaves falling on parched ground, and she bent a little toward me. Her eyes looked full into

mine. Almost I could feel her breath on my face as she asked in soft, clear tones:

" 'But enough of that! Ahmen, have you never talked of love?'

"How can I best make clear to you, *paal batab,* the thoughts that took firm hold of me at these words; save that a great light was suddenly born within me, as when a curtain is lifted from a darkened room to reveal the sun without. Just so swiftly did her meaning come to me, giving me much of hope, but taking from me the use of my tongue. So a silence fell between us, although our eyes held each the gaze of the other and I felt that the pounding of my heart in the stillness of the room must sound as does the hammer of the metal-worker.

"It is said of a woman that she knows many of the thoughts in the heart of man, though his tongue had never uttered them. So now did I wonder if indeed Ixkan had read, in each look I had cast upon her, the true meaning of the love wherewith I had loved her since first our eyes met. But not upon every man is bestowed the gift of wisdom needed in such matters. Many have there been since the first cycles of time and many more will there be until the end, lacking a ready tongue, yet never, thought I, had there been or ever would be, one who so wholly failed to take from his lap the gift thrown therein by the gods. For there is a goddess of love, *batab,* she whom the people of this land called *Ixyacunah;* but since I had never worshiped at her shrine, so at first did she refuse to cast one glance upon me or help to further my cause in this matter.

"When at last my speech returned to me, it was with tones whose trembling rivaled that of a helpless victim

about to be placed upon the stone of sacrifice—try as I did to become the master of my voice.

" 'Nay, Princess, I have yet to speak of love to any maid.'

"As these words trembled from my lips, the sound of light laughter came to my ears and I looked up to find the princess smiling upon me with a look that told me she doubted the truth of my words, yet at the same time did she seem pleased with them. And ere I could speak again, she kindly dismissed me from her presence and, as in a daze, I left the palace with her last words sounding again and again in my ears: 'Go now, Ahmen, but at some future time it may please me to talk with you again. Your manner has been agreeable to me.' In what way, I wondered, for I could not grasp her meaning."

CHAPTER XV

"THAT night I sought the advice of my friend, Canich, telling him of my visit to the Princess Ixkan and pouring into his ears, as one man to another, the depth of my love for her. Had words come so easily to my tongue in the telling of that love to Ixkan, I already had won her for my own, I thought.

" 'My heart beats fast at thought of her,' I told him, 'yet little am I learned in the ways of love and the customs of your country in these matters. Were she a maid of the people, instead of a princess, my knowledge might be increased—'

" 'Though your love would be no less strong,' Canich interrupted me, with a smile of sadness. 'Ahmen, my brother, ask not advice of one who knows no more of love than do you, yet who would willingly learn its lessons. But this I have learned, and through it can keep the hope that lies within me. Love goes where it will and seeks whom it may, be it either a princess or a lowly maid of the country. If you love Ixkan, named after the fairest of yellow flowers, let nothing stop you from inhaling the fragrant perfume of that flower.'

"Now for the second time within the space of one day did the god of understanding—if such there be—visit me and open my eyes to things that had been hidden from my mind. I thought of the sorrow that had been in the voice of my dear brother as he spoke of the betrothal of the Princess Ixlol to the prince of Lacan, and, looking at him now, I read in his face the answer to a question I had not spoken. So, he too, loved—the dark maid!

" 'Have you ever spoken of love to the Princess Ixlol?'—for I knew that he had meant me to read aright the thought expressed in his words.

" 'Nay, to what purpose would I?' he answered, 'since the king's mind has long been set on her marriage to another.'

" 'Then have I found one whose weakness of heart is equal to my own,' I told him with a smile, with which I sought to heal the little hurt I knew he felt within him.

"Then did he lightly laugh with me and replied: 'Rightly spoken, Ahmen, for are we two not brothers of the same blood?'

"So was the heaviness within us both lightened for the moment, but soon did our speech again become solemn when Canich, after a thoughtful silence, spake:

" 'It was today, brother, that the Princess Royal commanded your presence?'

" 'Even so; after the sun had passed midway through the heavens.'

" 'It was also early this same day that Ekchan sought audience with the fair princess, as I was leaving the council of the king. Perchance you have a rival for the favor of the princess,' he smiled. 'And a strong one, if such is his purpose. For Ekchan is one to ever gain his desires by any means, however unfairly. Of course, since the king so bitterly opposes his nephew, it would seem that he would not favor his marriage to the Princess Royal, who will one day rule *Luumilkay,*' he mused; but his words disturbed me greatly until a few days later when, to my joy, I was again bidden to come to Ixkan.

"As before, she seated herself gracefully upon the couch and bade me sit upon the cushion before her.

" 'Ahmen,' her soft voice began, and the very sound of my name from her lips was as a caress, 'when last we spoke together, I commanded you not to talk of matters of warfare. Forgive my haste; for a warrior so mighty as you, must indeed turn his thoughts always to that which occupies his days. Proud am I that the king has so honored you in *Luumilkay,* for since my eyes first gazed upon you have I known that well you deserved the honor.'

" 'Ah, Princess, it pleases me well that I was ever in your thoughts at all—but to be so highly estimated I had not dared to hope.'

" 'Since I foresee great honors for you in our land,' she continued, 'would I have you secured by influences which will not easily be destroyed. Know you that the king has enemies which would seek to destroy him and his power, and that I, through his loss of power, would also lose the right to become queen at his death. As you have been loyal to the king, must you likewise be loyal to me—who would succeed to the throne.'

" 'Aye, Princess,' I vowed with a firm resolve, 'ever will I be loyal to thee as I have been to the king, and ready to obey your slightest command.'

" 'Your words are wisely spoken. To me, the Princess Royal, falls the right to choose him whom I shall love and who will sit at my side and rule *Luumilkay.* Would such an honor be pleasing to you, Ahmen?'

"And now, *batab,* foresooth did my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth in amazement. Though her manner had betokened an interest in me far beyond that I had hoped for in all reason, never had my thoughts turned to the import of such a love between us—that I should become with her a ruler of *Luumilkay.* When I again found words and a voice with which to utter

them and I found that her eyes were bent upon me in soft questioning, I arose and fell upon my knees before her.

" 'Fair one, though I have worshiped you in silence and my heart has been within your keeping since when first I gazed upon your charms, never had I hoped for such favor from your own lips. I deem myself unworthy of so great an honor.'

" 'Worthy, if you would but follow my counsel, that our strength may be as one in wisdom and deed. I, who know much more than you could learn in many *uinals* of the conditions in this country, would seek to protect you ever from dishonor and defeat, that your name might ever be held highly as a king's name should be. Therefore, listen well to my words: if you would pledge yourself to serve me, and only me, to the end, then shall I one day rule *Luumilkay,* and that love which you seek, is yours also to command. Go now, and ponder well my words. Later, shall I send for you again to speak further on this, for there is much more for me to tell you!

"So saying, she arose, and I knew that for this time our meeting was ended. Loath was I to leave her presence, but I begged her not to forget her promise to send for me again soon, as I pressed my lips to her white hand which she held out to me. I left her, still wondering at her words, —'to serve me, and only me.'

"Though my feet tread as upon air as they carried me without guidance to my own house, still was my mind burdened with deep thoughts on the import of Ixkan's words. She had not only offered me her love which was beyond my hope, but by the meaning of her words had sought to promise me that I should one day rule with her as king of *Luumilkay*. But how? My

thoughts whirled so that my eyes saw things turning about as if I had overdrunk of *balche*.

"Then did many days pass while my mind grew calm with the demand upon my thoughts of other matters, so that though I arose each day with the hope that this day would the fair princess bid me come to her again, I began to fear that my manner and words had not been so pleasing to her as I had thought. So is a man as a helpless animal in a snare when he knows not how he is held in the thoughts of the woman who commands his heart. Still, I could do naught but await her summons.

"Not all our time was taken with the training of the soldiers, so Canich and I put our thoughts to many other things for the good of the kingdom.

"During our walks about the city, I had seen that the streets of it were well paved with blocks of stone, roughly finished and set into a depth of *zaccab*—that which you call cement, *batab*. As my eyes had rested on these smooth surfaces, I had thought that here would be possible the use of carts for the saving of human work, as was even then the custom in many countries of the north. These people of the land of *Luumilkay* I had found more learned in many ways than those in the country from which I had come, though lacking in others. Their work in stone was the equal of that seen today on the monuments in our cemetery in Merida, and none did I know which excelled them for the number of designs and the exactness of the smallest piece of work to be done.

"Therefore, with this learning which they possessed, it had been a matter of much thought with me that they had never set themselves to the task of making a

cart with wheels, to save the carrying of heavy loads, and even for travel.

"So, gathering a body of their most skilled artificers together, after some days a two-wheeled cart was made —by cutting sections from the trunks of large trees for wheels, and using other smaller trees for axles and other parts—which rolled along upon the stone paved streets after the manner of our *volans* of our own country.

"Yet such is the hold of custom that the convenience was little appreciated by most of the people. The carts were not much used because, since everything had to be brought into the city—often from long distances—and bearers were plentiful, they found little advantage in using the carts after entering the city where the roads were smooth and easy to walk on. Never have new things been accepted easily by people—so it is even today, *batab,* that men scoff at the things to which they are not long accustomed."

CHAPTER XVI

"ON the day that the cart was finished, scarce had I parted from Canich and entered my house, when Ahpec, my servant, came to tell me that a serving maid from the palace awaited speech with me. I found that it was she who had led me to the apartment of the Princess Ixkan on my last visit to her. With no little wonder did I enquire the cause for her presence. Looking first about her, to see that none save ourselves were there to hear, she spake:

" 'The Princess Ixkan bids you come to her apartment tonight, when the eye of day is gone and the quietness of sleep is upon the city.'

"So greatly did her words astound me that I had none with which to make answer, save for a bow of my head; and with a smile, the maid was gone on swift feet. Once more I wondered—why should I come to her at night?

"I sat and thought deeply on this command of Ixkan to her presence when the city slept. What would she require of me? At a time before she had talked in a mysterious way of love and loyalty to herself; therefore, must I go prepared to talk of things of which I knew little. Would she hold to her gift of love without requiring some service from me that I could not fulfill? If so, was I worthy of so great honor? If she truly loved me then would I have no cause not to return that love in full measure.

"What would she require in return for her love? Was I not already pledged to obey her wishes even as her father's, the king's?

"So the thoughts of my mind were as many in number as the deer in the land of *Luumilkay,* and with the swiftness of the deer did they pass.

"At last came the hour of silence within the city and the appointed time that I must go to the princess and learn of that which I did not understand. When I thought on these things, then my mind grew troubled; still must I go—for I was drawn to her as the small animal we call *thul,* is drawn to the mouth of the serpent.

"Without question, I passed by the guards at the outer gates and the entrance door to the palace, and coming within the hallway to the princess' apartment, found the serving maid who had delivered the message, awaiting me. She opened the heavy, door-like curtains leading into the room where Ixkan had last received me, then stepped aside for me to enter—but did not follow.

"So I found myself alone in the room, save for the voices that came to me from my inner thoughts. They seemed to speak of what was to be, though I read not their full meaning. In the room, all was as I had last seen it, save that now it was lighted, not by the full eye of day, but softly, by a lamp hanging by a golden chain from the ceiling.

"The scent of many flowers was about me, as though a garden had been emptied of its treasures to provide perfume for this one chamber. Ere many minutes had passed, I heard my name spoken softly, and looked about me to see whence it came. There seemed to be none other in the room—but now my eyes were drawn to the curtains at the far end of it. They moved gently, then were drawn aside by a hand, so white in the dim lighting of the room, that it might have been carved

from stone. It held my gaze, until into the space formed by the open curtains, stepped the Princess Royal.

"She was clad in a long filmy robe of white, plain save for the embroidery of the counted threads at the neck and sleeves—which was in gold. The light from the hanging lamp threw upon it a faint shade of pink, like the color that nature had painted upon her face. Of such thinness was it that, from where I stood, the light from behind the curtains drew an outline of her glorious form beneath the robe. Like some draped statue of the goddess of beauty did she appear.

"I stood without moving, until her voice again came forth, summoning me nearer. As I looked upon her, I found myself in the hold of a desire that I had no wish to overcome.

"Oah, *paal batab,* I was young those days and within me raged the fires of youth, which sped my feet, until the distance between us had gone. I dropped to my knees before her.

" 'Princess!' said I; and my voice trembled like a leaf in the wind.

" 'Nay,' she answered me quickly, 'call me not the princess. Here alone are we man and maid. Hast thou weighed well my words of our last meeting? Do you serve me alone, even against the king, my father, if I may command? If that be true, then that love whereof I now desire you to speak to me has made us of equal rank. Rise,' she bade me.

"I did so, and coming to my full height, found myself face to face with her. Then did she raise her face upward, so that I looked deep into her eyes. I trembled, as her body swayed toward me and I felt her softness against my breast—whether by intent or mishap, I knew not, nor did I care. Her perfumed breath was

I crushed her to me and pressed kisses upon her face

like the movement of a fan on my cheek, as she spoke in low tones:

" 'Tonight, we speak of love—my warrior?'

" 'Speak of it? Nay, I cannot speak; rather would I crush you with the strength of the coils of the *ochcan.*'

"Then, oah, *batab,* for a moment my reason left me. For, gazing into those eyes of deepest blue, I seemed to be drawn in and in to them until my very soul had become as one with hers. I crushed her to me and pressed kisses upon her face and throat in the wildness of passion. But, strange as it may seem, *batab,* as I felt her arms about me and her body against mine, my reason returned even though the desire for her was still within me. Strange thoughts whirled through my brain. Why should she, a royal princess, I questioned, offer her all to me, a rough warrior? What hidden purpose lay within her proffered love? Or was it only love? If so, I wronged her. Still, something within me cried aloud to refuse the love she offered.

"Oah, *batab,* had I listened then and afterward, to that voice within me, your ears would not now be hearing this tale.

"Suddenly I grasped her shoulders and pushed her clinging form from me with such force that she stumbled backward and fell upon a couch behind the parted curtains.

"Then did I rush out of the room, and fled down the broad stairway from the palace into the darkness of the night; nor did I stay my footsteps until I was far from the confines of the city.

"Then the smell of fresh, clean, evening air came to me and once again I felt the return of my senses which had left me in the presence of the princess. I sat me down, and the peacefulness that was in the gentle

breezes and the sounds of the night birds, soothed me and I drifted into sleep.

"In that sleep there came to me a vision of the goddess of love, *Ixyacunah,* who bent over me and spoke in a voice that sounded like the clear tones of a bell:

" 'Hear, Ahmen, the words of wisdom from one who is guardian of the greatest of life's plays, in which every man and maid at some time has a part. Even though in some things you are urged to act against your will, take the love that is offered you, counting yourself favored of the god of good fortune that it has been bestowed upon you. Still the impelling thoughts within you that stifle love, for truly spake one who has named you brother when he said that to all alike comes love.'

"After she had thus spoken, *Ixyacunah* bent closer to me, a pleasing smile upon her countenance; and doubtless the light touch of her lips on my forehead opened my eyes—to find that darkness was still upon the earth. But in my heart was a sense of great peace like that which comes with the making of a right decision. The vision had faded into blackness. No longer did I hold myself, for in my heart I thought I held the commands of the goddess of love.

"Oah, *batab,* I was mistaken. It was not the gentle goddess of love who had come to me in my dreams, but *Ixzabac,* the black goddess of the underworld. It could have been no other, for *Ixyacunah* is the goddess of true love only—and well was I to know it in other days.

"All the next day did I ponder the words of the goddess and of my own thoughts, and finally, impelled by the vividness of the dream and by an urge stronger than I felt myself able to command, I sent a note by messenger to Ixkan, requesting that I might come to her again that night. The words I wrote, *paal batab,* I

still remember: 'I shall come tonight to take that love I've been slow to claim.'

"Again, when the god of night reigned in the city, I entered the palace unquestioned, and found another serving maid awaiting me. But, to my surprise, she ushered me into another room than that which I had before entered. Naught could I say but silently to do her bidding; and found myself in the presence of—not Ixkan, but—Ixlol, her sister, who awaited my coming; for she held my message in her hand, and in her deep, dark eyes shone the dazzling light of great happiness. She seemed not to notice my amazement, but spoke in a gentle voice:

" 'And now, my warrior from the north lands, you have come to me? Though somewhat overbold in the message I hold here, I forgive you such boldness because a great warrior knows little of tender phrases of love.'

"I dared not confess that there had been some mistake made—how, I could not guess and did not learn until many days after. For I could not betray Ixkan's trust in me. Better to deceive Ixlol for the moment, than to betray the maid I loved. So I answered:

" 'Yea, but to what avail? You are betrothed to another, of noble birth, and I who am not his equal, must stand aside.'

" 'But love obeys no commands. I shall marry whom I will. Love seeks its own, even as you have sought me tonight. I cannot love him who will claim me for his bride,' she declared, and because of the words of my message, she flung her arms about my neck. What could I do but submit to her caresses until the violence of her emotions ceased, then put her from me as gently as possible, and depart as quickly as I could?

" 'I am indeed honored to learn of your love for me, Princess, but I must now depart ere the king discovers my presence here and his wrath descends upon us both. You are betrothed to the prince of Lacan, and to him must you turn your thoughts.'

" 'That, I shall not do,' and in her eyes flashed the fire of firm resolve, so that my heart ached with pity for her plight. Would that I might spare her the cruel fate she must meet, even as she had spared me the fate of the sacrifice. 'And now, my lord, that you have shown me that my love is returned, more firmly will I oppose my marriage to the prince of Lacan.' And then, *batab,* from this small matter came much trouble.

"Even as I pitied her, naught could I do but to leave her thus; and sad was my heart and heavy my steps as I retraced my way from the palace without seeing the Princess Ixkan. What thoughts would she hold of me now? Would ever I again have the opportunity to commend myself to her good graces? That I had lost a chance to become a king, mattered not to me; but the fear that I had lost her love was of greater importance than the loss of many kingdoms.

"The rising of another sun brought to the city a messenger from the land of Lacan to announce the early arrival of the Prince Nohkeh, who would present himself before the king and the Princess Ixlol. The messenger was a mighty man, both in size and importance, since he bore in his own land the title of *Nohocholcan* —which, in your language, *batab,* would be called Great Captain—and with him came a large company of warriors, servants and bearers.

"And ere three more suns had set, the prince himself arrived, with an even larger company of servants and bearers.

"In command of a picked company of our warriors, Canich and I met them at the gates of the city and, together with the singers of praises, escorted them to the king's palace, where all was in readiness to receive them in the Court of Jaguars, the king on his throne with a princess on either side of him. So that the prince might recognize the honor about to be bestowed upon him, this time was the Princess Ixlol seated upon the right of the king, in that place usually occupied by her sister. But my eyes sought those of Ixkan, whose thoughts I would have given much to know. The days had passed without a word from her, and each day added to my misery a hundredfold. But not once did her eyes meet mine, and my heart felt like a stone.

"In the court was a vast company, the common people alone being shut out from it. The councilors, priests and nobles of Zacna were in their places of custom on either side of the throne and near to it, while Canich and I with our bodyguards, stood each side of the court from one end of it to the other, thus forming a hallway of warriors.

"Along this aisle came the prince, preceded by the *holpop*. Behind him walked his servants and bearers, bowing their faces almost to the ground. At midway of the court they stopped, and his warriors remained at the entrance.

"After the *holpop* had duly performed his usual ceremony of presenting a visitor to the king—and this he did always, *batab,* to the entertainment and joy of none save himself—the prince advanced to the throne. His whole manner held much of pride and confidence and his head was high. He was gorgeously arrayed and he walked with a swaying from side to side, like those young men in Merida, *batab,* who command the respect

of their associates by reason of their fathers' influence and the spending of their fathers' wealth. I judged him, and rightly, to be indulgent for his own pleasures and one who liked too well his cup of *balche*.

"Now he addressed the king with pleasant words: 'All hail, King of *Luumilkay!* You who are mighty even as my father, the king of Lacan! From him I bring you greetings. But the chief purpose of my visit is to look upon your daughter, the Princess Ixlol, on account of a certain agreement made and sealed now many *tuns* past, by your Royal Majesty and the mighty king of Lacan.'

"My eyes turned upon the face of Ixlol, which seemed paler by a shade; but her eyes gazed straight ahead over the court before her, and never once looked upon the prince.

" 'Welcome to the land of *Luumilkay,* ruled by the mighty King Cocom of Zacna, O Prince of Lacan! It pleases me to present to you my beloved daughter, the Princess Ixlol, in whose behalf I extend to you greetings and welcome,' replied the king.

"The prince bowed low before him, then turned aside to stand before Ixlol, took the hand she coldly extended, and kissed it with graceful gesture.

"Then was the prince escorted to the rooms of the palace prepared for his comfort, to await the great feast by which the king would honor him that night. Another festive occasion for the entertainment of the prince was on the day when Canich and I joined him in a hunt which would end in a night's stay at the home of Ekchan in the mountains, where we had been bidden by him.

"I was both eager and unwilling to meet with Ekchan, the king's nephew—whose name reads the Black

Serpent—about whom many had spoken to me; for the impression I had formed of him was not a very pleasant one. I wondered what he would think of me, a stranger from a far-away land, who had been made one of the commanders in the king's army, while he, who mayhap should be on the throne, dwelt far away in the mountains and commanded only deserters and ignorant *peons.*

"We set out just after the light of day had risen upon the earth, accompanied by servants to carry what we needed in the way of weapons.

"After the space of a few hours, we came to the hills, outside of that valley wherein lies the city of Zacna. Many animals and not a few birds of large size did we add to our collection of the day's killing before the eye of day commenced its downward journey below the earth.

"As we came near to Ekchan's estate, I saw that within this was in truth a small village in itself; the houses being circled by a high wall, outside of which were the homes of the servants and bearers.

"The gate in the wall was opened to us and we entered into the patio of large proportions. To one side of it, the land was planted to all manner of trees, the greater number of them in full bloom and all looked as though much care had been bestowed upon them. On the other side was the flower garden; and this, too, was a mass of color in every shade that could be named. In the center of the patio was the customary *cenote,* bordered by reeds and the surface of the water broken by floating flowers.

"Back of this stood the house, into which Ekchan welcomed us. Tall was his stature and pleasant his face in greeting, but well could I see why many had become

his followers. Here was a man better to be called friend than enemy. His voice held within it a note of command, but it sounded with welcome as he bade us enter his house and ordered his servants to make us comfortable.

"Many could have sat down to the meal spread before us and none suffer hunger. To the wild turkey, presented as a gift from our day of hunting, had been added young deer, cooked on a stone oven; cakes of finely ground corn served with honey, baskets filled with all manner of fruits from Ekchan's own growing; sweetmeats made from sugar taken from plants. There were great jugs of *balche,* drinks of frothing chocolate and *pozole* of finely ground corn and honey and little cups of *xtabentun* to be drunk after the meals, which was greatly to the liking of the prince of Lacan.

"While we partook of the food, we spoke of many things going on within the gates of the city of Zacna. The calm of our words was undisturbed until Ekchan, suddenly speaking with great stress and much meaning, his eyes going from one to another of us in turn, said:

" 'Now that the Princess Ixlol will soon leave the country to become queen of another land, the king will seek a mate for the Princess Royal.' He paused at the name of Ixlol, and looked directly at Canich, whose face darkened. 'What think you would be his answer did I offer myself as one to share with her the throne?'

"I could see at once that his question had within it a hidden meaning. He had bethought him an easier way to the throne, through a union with his cousin and, as he stopped speaking, his eyes came upon me with a look of deep meaning, so that I knew that in some way he had learned of my attraction for Ixkan, and sought to stir anger within me by these words.

"For a time, during which neither of us made reply, Ekchan waited, a seeming smile of patience on his countenance. Then Canich spoke for us both:

" 'Your answer will come from the lips of Ixkan herself,' he said, 'since, being the Princess Royal, she has the voice of power to choose for herself the man she will marry.'

"Ekchan laughed, and the sound of his voice filled the room. He called to a servant to fill his golden cup once more with *balche;* then emptied it at one drink, before he spoke again.

" 'Even if that man be the king's nephew whom he would oppose in any advance which would place him upon the throne that he so jealously guards? But Ekchan is not one to stand by while another takes what he wants, regardless of what the king wills. So shall the Princess Ixkan decide the matter!'

"Before his words were finished, my eyes sought Canich in fear of what was about to come. He made motion to rise to his feet, but before he could do so, Ekchan was up, in token that the meal was at an end.

"A cunning move, *batab,* one which you of the north would name diplomacy; for since we partook of meat in his house, must our tongues remain silent of much they would utter, and his be always the lead we follow.

"At his words, fear gripped my heart that he would find favor with Ixkan, since I had refused that love she had offered me and had aroused her anger. But my rival was also my host and I dared not oppose him, even in words, at this time.

"He led us out into the patio where now began, for our eyes, an entertainment of dancers and singers.

"The dances in this land of *Luumilkay* differed little from those I had seen in my own country, but drew

my interest. Boys and girls formed into two lines, facing each other. Then as the music from drums of logs and pipes of stone started, they came forward to the center and, without even their hands touching, danced in circles about each other, keeping strict time to the music; always with the most grave faces, as if they performed a duty rather than that which gave them pleasure. Those who played, also sang in soft, pleasing tones.

"As soon as the custom would permit, we sought our rooms for the night, thus to prevent any further talk with Ekchan. Prince Nohkeh showed an eagerness to return to Zacna, so, as early as we might the following morning, we spoke the words of needful thanks and went on our way."

The King's friendly smile left his face

CHAPTER XVII

"WHEN Nohkeh had departed to his own country with his train of servants and bearers—escorted without the city by our warriors with great display of ceremony and honor—then did his messenger, the *Nohocholcan,* once more appear before the king and his court, and make formal demand for the hand of Ixlol, after which he withdrew from the court to the place set apart for his comfort and rest until the matter should be settled between the king, the council, the priests and the nobles of our land; when he would return to hear the answer.

"He and his men had but gone from sight when the king's friendly smile left his face and he burst forth with words of anger:

" 'He tells us that if his demand is granted, he will depart in peace with his spears pointed downward! Have I to hear such threatening words from one who holds himself higher than I, and spoken by this black dog of a black master! I am minded to send him back to Lacan and to his king with words even stronger than his own!'

"My eyes could see that none of the councilors were much moved by these words of the king, since they knew that such they were, and no more. Therefore, did they all enter into a council together that they might finally decide this matter. After much talking between themselves, there arose the chief councilor—a man of many years and much wisdom.

"In a voice that had in it much strength, yet the calmness of a smooth river, he addressed the king:

" 'O King, your council has talked of this matter and to them it seems wise to return a soft answer to the strong words of the messenger from the land of Lacan. Our thoughts should be those of our people, who wish to be at peace with those that dwell in that land. Since this prince asks not for the hand of the Princess Royal in marriage, but that of the younger princess, still one of your blood will be left to rule over *Luumilkay* when you, O King, journey to your gods. This being so, our voice in the matter is to return a pleasant answer to the king of Lacan and a promise of the Princess Ixlol in marriage to his son.'

"His words pleased the king, for you see, *batab,* it offered him a way of smooth walking, and yet would cause the people to look with favor upon him. One only had no place in his thoughts, and that was she upon whom the weight of this matter rested—the Princess Ixlol.

"Before the king could make reply to the words of the chief councilor, she was on her feet, even as I had expected, ready to fight for her own cause. Like the sharp meeting of two pieces of flint, her eyes flashed fire; her form was as straight as a strong, young tree and her words came with the evenness of a hammer's blow.

" 'Hold! Have I no voice in this matter—I, whose name has been spoken as one greatly concerned therein? Am I, a daughter of the royal blood, to be bargained for in marriage and sent to a strange country that peace might come to mine own?'

"Now indeed was the king wroth; more so since he knew that his daughter spake words in which was much truth.

" 'Ungrateful one!' he cried, 'think you not of the

honor bestowed upon you by bringing peace to the land of *Luumilkay,* or do you place yourself above the duty owed by you to your country?'

"Quickly, the Princess Ixlol made reply to this: 'Nay, my father, willingly would I go to the stone of sacrifice for my own country, if needs be, but my body and soul are mine own, and never will I bestow them, save where my heart may also be given. Rather than this, will I remain always a maid and espouse no man!'

"Many inquisitive eyes were now turned upon the Princess Ixlol, and they were filled with wonder at her courage in this battle of words with her father, the king. Though my thoughts were hers in this matter, my gaze now went to the face of the Princess Ixkan to see the effect of her sister's words upon her.

"The fair maid was leaning forward in her seat. The look in her eyes, which were fixed on her sister, was one of displeasure as though in fear that the outcome of this word battle might not be that of her wishes. Was this the sweet maid who had spoken to me of love not many days past? I could not think it, and unwilling longer to see her countenance thus, I took my eyes from her face and looked over at my blood-brother, Canich.

"He stood opposite me and in front of the Princess Ixlol. Now at sight of his face I felt as though a dart from the *hulche* had struck my heart. A mask of sadness had settled upon it and the gaze he held on the face of the princess was that of a beast stricken down in the chase. Yet, in it, too, was a little of pride in her courage.

"Long did we all wait for the king to speak once more, for it seemed as though his very breath had been taken from him at these last words from Ixlol. She, too, waited, but there was no fear written upon her

countenance. She looked to none for help in what she knew must now come—for had not her speech been one of opposition to her father, the king? Yet, since the words had come from her heart, she had spoken them fearlessly, and in like manner she awaited the result they would bring forth from her royal parent.

"It came, in a few words and not those of wisdom, but of authority.

" 'My daughter, the decision of the council is mine own—that your hand be given in marriage to the prince of the land of Lacan. I, the King, command you to accept the conditions of the agreement made and sealed by me with my own pledged word, now many *tuns* past.'

" 'Never!' That one word from the lips of the Princess Ixlol sped like an arrow from its bow, from one end of the court to the other. All heard it, and now there was a movement among those present, a sense of trouble at hand.

"Quick upon it came the king's final act. He raised his hand with a motion that stilled all sound within the court, then called the guards forward, who placed themselves at either side of the princess. When this was done, the eyes of the king rested upon me.

" 'Ahmen, stand forth!' was his command. I did so, placing myself before him, and looking full into his face, awaited his words, though filled with wonder.

" 'Escort the Princess Ixlol to the *Kunathan*. There, in my name, you will command that she be held in seclusion until at the end of one month she be brought forth to prepare for her journey to Lacan as the promised wife of the Prince Nohkeh.' Then he turned to the councilors and addressed them:

" 'This is now spoken; let none seek to set aside or

change my command. Bring the messenger before us once more, that we may give answer to his words.'

"A stillness now fell upon the court, save for the footsteps of those who went to bring the messenger to the presence of the king. I saw that now the Princess Ixkan had leaned back in her seat, with the movement of one released suddenly from tightened bonds, and a pain smote my heart at the thought that must be in her mind against her sister. At Canich I dared not look, for there was no courage left in me, knowing what he must now be feeling.

"As Ixlol, like one that moved in a dream, stepped from the platform, I took up my place at her side to escort her from the court. But, in front of the platform she stopped and, turning, faced the king. From there, she spoke the words that disowned him forever as her parent.

" 'As king, you have spoken, and as subject I obey the words of your mouth, O King: from this time on, you are no longer my father, for this unfatherly act has forever severed the ties of kinship between us. Be warned, for now it is in my hands to deal with, not as a princess of your house, but as a rebellious subject. Disaster will follow this act of yours.'

"She waited for no reply, but walked at my side the length of the court, until we came without it and to where a palanquin awaited her. Before entering it, she requested me: 'Bid them send Nicte to me at the *Kunathan,* for serving maid.'

"Without delay, I sent a servant to the palace to see that her wish was fulfilled. Then, lining up ten of my warriors on either side of the palanquin, I spoke a word of command to the bearers and we set out.

"I have yet to speak to you for the first time of the *Kunathan,* which in your language is 'the good house of speech,' *batab*. It was a place set apart for women and for this reason I had not seen it in my walks about Zacna. Also, it was not a little distance from the rest of the public buildings. So in escorting the Princess Ixlol there, I had my first close look at it.

"This building was the only one of its kind in Zacna, being formed of three buildings, placed one on top of the other, each smaller than the other, like one which you have seen, *batab,* in the City of the Sacred Well, called the Nunnery. At first, it had been used only as a retreat for those maidens who were chosen as sacrifices to the gods, or as brides for those men who were to go to the stone of sacrifice. And here, even to this day of which I speak, in quiet retreat from the outer world, they prepared for this great honor.

"Our coming had already been spoken of by a runner who had gone before us. As we entered by one of the five doors into the main reception room, one of the *Ixchels*—nuns, so you call them—came forward to meet us. To her did I repeat the commands of the king, while the princess stood close by, silent and still, her head held high and proud.

This main room was very plain, the several tables and the low seat having been painted with black that shone like polished stone. Upon the walls and ceiling were many figures, painted in colors. The stone floor was of white *zaccab,* its surface unbroken by even a mat. Several doors led off from the room, on two sides; while from another, a narrow hallway led to one of the smaller buildings.

"It was in one of these that the Princess Ixlol was to be housed. Thence the *Ixchel* now started to lead the

way, and believing my duty finished, I turned to leave the *Kuna*. But the voice of the princess stayed me before I had yet reached the door.

" 'Wait,' she said, 'I would have speech with you, Ahmen.' Turning, she bade the *Ixchel* stand aside from us.

"This she did, going through one of the doorways on the other side of the room which was separated from the reception hall by a long curtain of red.

"And now that Ixlol and I were alone, the mask of courage and pride left her face and she became as one in much need of comfort and help. When at length she spake, so changed was the tone of her voice that I turned to look at her in amazement.

" 'Ahmen,' she said, 'what think you? Should I have obeyed, when first spake the voice of him I once called father, since now must I obey the commands of one I have named forever stranger?'

"For a space I held my tongue, for indeed no ready answer was upon it. Ixlol saw my embarrassment.

" 'Fear not that the *Ixchel* will overhear your speech and carry it to the king, for here was I trained in childhood. Even as I do love them, do the *Ixchels* return my love.'

"When I knew that I could no longer delay my answer, I spoke in tones so low that they might be heard by Ixlol alone.

" 'Yea, Princess, to whom I have sworn loyalty forever, the words you spake before the king and council would have been mine had I stood in your place. And now would I do all that lies in my power to aid you.'

"Her voice then became very quiet and her whole manner changed. She drew nearer to me and her words were for me alone. 'Do you remember, O Ahmen, that

night when you sent me the message which said, "I shall come tonight to take that love I have been slow to claim." Therefore, well must you know, as can no other, the cause for my refusal to accept the prince in marriage.'

"Oh, *paal batab,* well I knew what she meant, and to my sorrow, but there was naught that I could do, since I had no part in the thing which gave her reason to think I loved her. So I told her.

" 'Naught can I say, O Princess, but to repeat the words as I told you on that night. I am no rival for a prince of royal birth, and I have pledged allegiance to the king, your father.'

" 'Do you not remember," she pleaded in a voice that tore at my heartstrings, 'when a young warrior stood before a king? He was from a strange country, few were the number of days left him on this earth, and in the end was death awaiting him,' she went on, while I heard her with bowed head, 'but my voice gave him back his life—and in that same hour did I give him my heart, also!'

"When I looked up at her again she was smiling sadly and with questioning eyes. 'What say you—my warrior, Ahmen?'

"I answered her in a wavering voice, 'Naught can I say, O Princess, in this matter.'

" 'Then a faint heart is yours indeed,' she said quickly, 'else would you demand me of the king, and win me in fair fight against this prince of Lacan!'

" 'Then so must you ever look upon me, Princess; for this thing can never be!' I answered her.

" 'You cast aside the love I offer you, Ahmen? Are there other reasons? Are you then already pledged to another?'

" 'Nay, Princess. Yet there is another reason. Know you not that for many years, has one without words worshiped at your feet. And—he has made me his blood-brother. Therefore, though it left no heart in me, would I stand aside for him in this matter!'

"Ixlol was silent a long moment, with no surprise written on her countenance. When at last she spoke, it was to say but one word, softly, and as though with much reverence, 'Canich!'

" 'Yea, Princess. And I would that to him had been given the honor of taking the place of Prince Nohkeh.'

" 'A great man and a noble warrior. Next to you could I give my heart into his keeping. Yet, since the one I have chosen refuses me aid at this time, must I give myself as a peace offering for the land of *Luumilkay.*'

"In the moment's silence that now fell between us, I could see that great anger was rising within her, like a forest fire which grows to great proportions. Her eyes sent forth a flame of anger, and her whole form shook like a slender tree in a storm.

" 'Let those who send me forth against my will, beware! Not yet is their part in this matter finished!' she cried, and with these words clapped her hands.

"So quickly that I caught not a movement of the curtains, the *Ixchel* stood before us; and now led the Princess Ixlol down the long passageway to her apartment.

"Like one carven in stone I stood and watched, until she had gone from my sight. Perchance I could have loved this maiden had there been no other in my heart.

"Then did my footsteps point toward the home of my blood-brother, Canich; but he had not yet come from the palace.

"As I crossed the patio, the sound of sobbing fell

on my ear and I turned aside to see whence it came. I found Nicte sitting on the ground, her head bowed in her arms on one of the stone seats, almost swept away by the flood of her own tears. Nearby, its eyes seeming to show grief at the sight of its mistress' sorrow, sat the young jaguar. As I came near, it gave a little cry, and Nicte looked up quickly. She sprang to her feet and came to me.

"My arms went about her in comfort, even as might those of her own brother, and between sobs, she told me:

" 'Ahmen, brother, they have refused me presence in the room of the Princess Ixlol at the *Kunathan*. None may go to her; she is to be left alone—alone!'

" 'The sorrow in my heart for Ixlol is as your own, little sister,' I told her, 'yet it is still greater for your brother.'

"Nicte suddenly raised her face to mine. 'Well do I know of his sorrow and great is my pity for him. But love for Canich prompted not the princess' conduct. Know you not, Ahmen, that it is you whom the Princess Ixlol loves? How can men be so blind where are concerned their hearts and the women who love them? Well do I know the hearts of both the princesses, and for loyalty could no man seek a truer one than that of the dark princess. Since your coming to the city of Zacna, have I known of Ixlol's love for you and sore it grieved me when you sought the Princess Ixkan. Did she not refuse to spare your life when it was given her to do so? But for the Princess Ixlol, would you not long since have been cast into the well of sacrifice?'

" 'Truly am I grateful to the Princess Ixlol for the saving of my life,' I replied, 'but such gratitude cannot command love. Love obeys no command. The fair

princess holds my heart in her keeping, whether or not she desires it.'

" 'And lightly will that love be held. Ah, brother, but I sought to spare you the grief which is sure to be yours. Ekchan seeks the Princess Royal in marriage, and great will be his anger toward the man who opposes him. So did I try in my small way to bring you happiness in the love of Ixlol. It was I who took your message to Ixlol which was intended for Ixkan.'

"As she said this with a defiant nod of her little head, I gasped with amazement:

" 'And made greater the sorrow of the dark princess—since she now believes that I love her! Oh, Nicte, would that you had not so rashly interfered. Even now is the anger of Ixkan bitter against me that I did not return to her.'

"And as I went on to my own house, my heart was no less heavy within me for what I had learned. Oh, *batab,* but those who would make busy themselves with the affairs of others, should step warily. Even the wisest may cause grief to many lives in but the performing of one hasty act. And as well try to stop a mighty rock when it begins to roll down the steep side of a mountain as to stop youth's headlong pursuit of what he believes to be love. Yet often, too, could we profit from those who are strong friends to us, to our greatest joy, had we but the vision to see before us.

"I did not look again upon the face of Ixlol before she departed for the land of Lacan—as she did within the space of one month. Neither did I wish to see her, for I desired to have Canich take my place in this matter, though I never heard words from his lips of it.

"As was the custom, a company of nobles, warriors, servants and bearers, suitable to one of her birth, was

sent from Lacan to escort the Princess Ixlol there for her marriage to their prince.

"At either side of the gates of the city, Canich and I assembled our warriors; and a great number of people pressed as close as they might, to catch one last look at the princess. But when her palanquin passed by, the curtains were close drawn; and it was well guarded on all sides so that none saw her as the whole company passed through the gates and out onto the road which led to the south.

"So did Ixlol depart from *Luumilkay,* as all thought, forever; but soon was she to return, bringing with her clouds of a deeper black than those which broke the blue of the heavens that day, as the departing company reached the edge of the earth and passed from our sight."

As Ahmen ceased speaking, his listeners returned from their dreams of the past and looked dazedly about them. Cranton realized that he had been unconsciously aware of Ahmen's voice growing weaker and weaker. What was the time, anyway? He fumbled for his watch, pushing his sleeve back impatiently; and by the time he had uncovered it, the flame of a match burned close to his hand. Two-thirty! The old man had been talking since shortly after noon of the previous day, with scarcely a break!

Cranton looked across at him; his head was sunk upon his breast and he was fast asleep. In the flickering light, his appearance startled the young man. His eyes and cheeks seemed sunk into his head and he looked weak and drawn. But a second inspection somewhat reassured him. The shadows had accentuated the gruesomeness of his appearance.

The stillness in the opposite temple told Cranton that the other boys had long since settled down for the night, so it left him and Lupe to follow the example. The latter now grinned up into his face, the remains of the burned match still held in his fingers.

"Let's call it a day and get some sleep. Don't disturb the old fellow until he wakes in the morning."

But Ahmen was not asleep, it so proved. He now raised his hand and declared, "Ere the sun sets upon another day, you will have heard from my lips that part of my story to which all the rest has been leading. That told, *batab,* I shall sleep for more than the space of two suns."

Cranton laughed. "Sleep longer than that, old wizard, and I'll see that your slumbers are not disturbed; if only you will wait until the story is ended. Not for much gold would I miss the end of this tale, Ahmen."

"The first light of tomorrow's sun will find me awake, *paal batab,*" he said gravely; then he sank into a quiet sleep.

For a while the younger man sat watching him. The regular rise and fall of the old man's bosom was so faint as scarcely to be seen; the lines of his face, even in relaxation, were fine drawn. There was no doubt that the telling of his story was costing him much in physical and nervous exhaustion and that each day found his energy more and more depleted. For a moment, Cranton felt a pang of guilt; then remembered how wiry were these old Maya Indians. Even then, he was uneasy about him.

He lay awake in his hammock, revolving in his mind Ahmen's story of the princesses. He puzzled over the fact that Ahmen, in the days of his youth, had not been able to discern more clearly the depths of Ixlol's love,

as compared with that of her more selfish sister. Was this to be his confession on the morrow? He felt that his words were leading that way, and the thought rather pleased him. Or had his love for the dark princess come too late? The dark princess?—Lolita. . . . And in that moment, sleep claimed him, as a visionary face smiled up into his.

"Dolores!" he called anxiously.

From afar came her reply:

"Nay, I am the Princess Ixlol—see?" And she lifted to his gaze a medallion which hung about her neck. Then the vision was gone. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

THE next day, a watery sun flooded the earth with a prediction of fine weather before long. Possibly by tomorrow they could begin their examination of the ruins. But unless the wizard's story were finished, Cranton had no intention of interrupting it for mere exploration. Such a story was rare indeed; and he felt that not only was he obtaining information, for such as he had never dared to hope, regarding the inhabited city of his ambitions, but that in the same tale lay some revelation that would prove to be of personal value to him. So Ahmen started upon the last lap of his story:

"On returning from the city gates, I met before the palace, Ekchan, who was about to enter.

" 'Greeting, warrior of the north,' he spoke to me. 'Is it then your official duty to escort the royal princesses to their betrothed? Mayhap the day is not far distant when such will be your duty to me,' and with a smile that hid the scornful twist of his lips, he went within the palace.

"At that moment did my dislike of him mount to a jealous hatred, and I feared that in my madness to know how I stood with Ixkan, I should do that which would destroy whatever chance I already had for her favor. I could not believe that she would accept his proposal of marriage; but might she, like her sister, be forced to submit to the will of others?

"But my fears which gnawed at my very soul like the worm with stripes of red which gnaws at the roots of trees, in the days which followed—each slower in

its passing than the one before—proved to be like the mists of the morning—soon dispelled. For again, did she send for me to come to her; and so great was my joy that neither reason nor fear swayed me; and a great army, yea, even the ten thousand warriors of Canich could not have held me from going to her. I went in great haste.

"As I again came to her apartment, I found the same maid awaiting me. With no words, she motioned me to the door, and I found myself once more within the room from which I had made such haste to depart, now many suns past. This time it was not empty, for by the dim light of the lamp I could see that one reclined upon a couch, and before I could wonder more, the soft, sweet voice that I knew and loved so well—spoke:

" 'So you have returned, my warrior. Some time have I waited to call you, but well I knew that you would come, for my woman's heart told me. Sit here and tell me why you left me last, with so great haste.'

" 'O Princess,' I answered, 'since you knew that I would return, then you must also know my reason for leaving.'

"She did not speak then, but moved a little, making a place for me to sit at her feet. This I did, and looking at her loveliness as she lay there, my emotions became as turbulent as the rapids of the great river by which I had entered her land; and no more could I speak for the trembling of my lips.

" 'So it was that I gave you enough time to weigh your thoughts well. Now that the Princess Ixlol is gone from the palace, am I lonely, and desire the presence of one who will fill my soul with happiness.'

"And it would seem that Ekchan was not the one

whose presence she thus sought, so I thought, with relief.

" 'Never again will I leave your presence save at your command,' I vowed. And thus, in my happiness I bound myself to her, believing that Ekchan held no place in her heart.

" 'And you will promise to do that always which I deem wise for your safety and our welfare together?' she softly entreated.

" 'Always, fair one, even to the last of my days,' I whispered as I bent over her to take her in my arms, blinded to all things but love.

"Just before *kin* started his journey across the heavens, when the light was yet grey with the mist, I sought my own house and was met at the door by Ahpec, whose face showed that no sleep had been in his eyes that night, and greatly was he disturbed.

" 'Master, within the night came a messenger with quickness of feet from the *Kunathan.* Much has come to pass and one is there who commands your presence!'

" 'The *Kunathan?* Who there has the right to command the presence of Ahmen?' I asked sharply.

" 'I was commanded to say it is one who, holding once the life of my master in her hands, released it to him; and now asks, in return, a token of his loyalty.'

" 'Ixlol! It cannot be!' nor was I less amazed when Ahpec strengthened the truth of my words.

" 'Even so, master!'

"Now the sense of trouble came strong upon me, for like the lightning's flash, there came to my mind the words spoken by Ixlol on the day when I had escorted her to the place—words of warning against those who

had forced her will in the matter of her marriage. The sign of her return to Zacna seemed to be an ill one!

" 'Await me, that you may accompany me to the *Kuna;* and see that none hears the words that your lips have now spoken.'

" 'It is as you say, master,' he answered, and bowed low as I left the room to change from the more courtly attire in which I had gone to the palace.

"Then together we started on our way to the good house of speech, and as we walked, he told me what he had learned of the happenings there, so that I might be prepared for the meeting with Ixlol.

"In the darkness of night, accompanied by but one serving maid, she had entered the city and gone at once to the *Kunathan.* There did the *Ixchels* look upon her with amazement, but no words would she speak to make plain the cause of her return. 'Send now to the house of Ahmen, and bid him come to me without delay,' was all she would say to them except to command of them silence of her presence there until she had seen me; and to the reasoning of the *Ixchels* that this would be an unseemly act to bring the anger of the king upon their heads, should he hear of it, she closed her ears. So, at last, they had sent a messenger to my house; and Ahpec, unwilling that any should know where I was, had promised to bring me thither at once upon my return.

"This much I had learned ere we came to the house, where a young woman, with fear written plainly upon her face, opened the door to us.

"Along a hallway she led me, to a room at its end, where Ixlol awaited my coming. Scarce had the door closed behind my back, when I dropped upon one knee

before her and lifted her hand to my forehead, waiting in silence for her to speak.

"She bade me rise and pointed me to a low seat facing her, but even when I was seated, I awaited her words and marveled at her quiet manner.

"Her eyes looked straight ahead and beyond me, as though she saw, in pictures before the eyes of her mind, all that had come to pass since she had left the land of *Luumilkay,* to become the wife of the prince of Lacan. Filled with pain as they were—and this I knew to be truly so when she had told me all—the thought of her suffering had drawn not one line upon the firm, even surface of her face.

" 'None shall ever hear, at length, all that has filled my days since I arrived in the land of Lacan,' she said, breaking at last the silence. 'But to you, Ahmen, will I tell it in few words to prepare you for what is to befall our land because of these happenings.'

" 'Befall our land?' I repeated, though sensing already the answer to my own question; for truly I seemed to read the meaning of her words. My voice trembled, 'You speak, O Princess, as one who sees trouble well on its way?'

" 'Even as I promised those who forced my will to this marriage! . . . But let me speak on, for when I have come to the end, you will see clearly the reason for my haste in the telling of this thing.'

"Indeed, I wished that it were already said, knowing that the thoughts of my mind at this moment were even as would be the words of her mouth.

" 'Arriving in Lacan,' Ixlol went on, 'I was received as befitted my title. I was supplied with every comfort and all manner of costly clothing and precious stones given me. At once began the wedding celebrations;

great pageants by day, with processions of the people paying me honor as I rode through the streets in the royal palanquin at the side of the prince. At night, the hours of sleep were broken by the sound of trumpets and much feasting.

" 'For two days did this go on, and not until the evening of the third day was I allowed to enter my bedchamber before the sky began to glow with redness. On this evening scarce had I lain upon my couch, when the door leading to my apartment opened with a loud noise, and the prince entered. He had drunk overmuch of *balche* and other liquors and he was scarce able to stand upright on his feet. I asked him to leave me to rest until the god of sleep should have closed the eyes of us both for a short space of time; but he refused and, calling to me in angry tones, asked if I were not his to do with as he willed.

" 'When I commanded him to leave me, his anger grew; and, aware that he knew not fully what he said or did, I tried to escape from the room. He stopped me. We fell to struggling. Twice did he seize me in his arms and seek my lips with his own. Twice did I break his hold upon me. Each time his anger became stronger, until no longer did he have control of his actions. He became as one from whom all reason had gone.

" 'Now I fled in terror to the opposite end of the room. With a murderous gleam in his eyes he grasped a dagger which he carried in a sheath at his belt and crouching low he followed me with his eyes. Suddenly he sprang at me like a jaguar leaping on a deer, and struck a mat which slipped and threw him with a crash on the stone floor. I stood trembling now, in fear of my life and waiting for my end like one sentenced to death.

" 'He did not move, and next I saw blood trickling from beneath him. He had fallen on the point of his dagger. At once, I realized that my telling of the mishap would fall upon ears that would not understand or believe, and I would be branded as a murderer, so I thought best to leave the city quickly. This I was able to do, as many people were still coming and going to the festivities. Outside the city, my own serving maid from Zacna was able to obtain the services of a palanquin and bearers and under cover of the darkness we fled to the gates of this city and thence to the *Kuna*.'

"As the voice of Ixlol ceased, silence again fell upon us. Impatient as I had been to hear her, now that it was said, I found myself held firm to my seat by the horror of the things she had told me. She it was who at last saw the need for action, and spoke:

" 'Within the space of one day will the Lacans send warriors to demand me of the king in payment for the death of their prince. Well do I know that they will place this deed upon my head. But should the king—he whom I once called father—hear of my presence in the land, I fear that he would not delay giving me back into the hands of the warriors of Lacan to thereby save himself from the danger of warfare, even as he gave me in marriage to our enemy for the same purpose.' Her tones were filled with scorn as she spoke thus of the king. 'You must see to it now, Ahmen, that your warriors are ready to meet theirs in battle, for a bitter war must follow.'

"I arose and bowed again over her hand, ready to take my departure. Before I could do so, she spake again:

" 'Ere you go, I would tell you that I have learned of your love for my sister, the Princess Royal, and

great is my pity for you, Ahmen. You seek love in the arms of one who knows not its meaning; yet you, of all men, are most worthy of it!'

" 'Nay!' I cried, 'You wrong one who has already given me the greatest gift that woman may bestow on man—and what is that save love?'

"She smiled sadly. 'Though it is of my own sister, still I speak the thoughts of my mind. Once again do I tell you, Ahmen, Ixkan knows naught of that affection which, if called upon, would give its very life in gladness for the one who is loved. Rather does she take in equal measure as she gives, and more.'

" 'That is as it should be,' I declared, as I felt anger surging within me that I must needs excuse the love of Ixkan. 'I would ask you to silence your words, Princess, for Ixkan I love with all my heart.'

"Now she looked closely at me and her voice was filled with longing when she spoke, 'I would be the one to draw the curtain of confusion from before your eyes and show you clearly love's mystery. Already have I been too bold in my impatience, Ahmen, but the day comes, and it is not far distant, when this shall be.'

"I pleaded with her, 'Princess, I beg leave to depart. My loyalty demands that I hear you no longer on this matter—loyalty not only to the maid I love, but to one who has named me brother. Since love, such as man holds in his heart for a woman, can never be between you and me, there is no cause for more words between us.'

" 'He of whom you speak has read aright my heart, and understands,' she answered. 'So is his love proven more true than yours for my sister, and hers for you. He gives without demand and asks for no return. Would that it were given me to repay such love, rather

than seek to give my heart into the keeping of one who has refused it. But this is a matter in which we have small voice, for it is thrust upon us by a power stronger than our own.'

"Now, as she spake thus of Canich, words failed me. Though I would not grant it, even to myself at this time, yet the earnestness of her words and the conviction with which she uttered them, stayed ever in my mind. As I left the *Kunathan* it came to me that although Ixlol feared that she might be returned to Lacan, still was it my duty to the king, her father, to tell him where she was.

"Soon after I had returned to the palace, messengers arrived from Lacan, demanding the return of the princess, that she might be sacrificed to the black god, *Yum Zabacku,* to avenge the murder of the prince, for all in Lacan believed her guilty of the crime.

"The council was hastily assembled to deliberate upon the matter. The king was much perturbed, but knowing full well that refusal to obey the command of the Lacans would result in warfare, he wavered, hoping to find a more diplomatic way to settle the affair. He referred the decision to a vote of the priests and sought their council in this question which involved the rule of sacrifices.

"After a long conference did the high priest announce, in clever words which I could not repeat did I remember them, that this was the only fitting manner for the great King Cocom to appease the wrath of the gods for the murder committed by his daughter; for the gods of all kingdoms demanded retribution for a nefarious crime.

"Then did Canich, his breath coming fast, his eyes blazing as with fire of the gold smelters coming forth

from them, appeal to the king, claiming his right as the chief in command of a great army, to have voice in the matter. Earnestly did he plead in defense of Ixlol, and Cocom, influenced by his love for his daughter and the eloquence of Canich, who was in fact the chieftain of ten thousand spears—which had great weight with the king—was moved. When Canich had ceased speaking, the king turned to me. 'And what say you, O warrior from a strange country, concerning this command of the king of Lacan?'

"Loath was I to have voice in the matter, in which I had little interest except my pity for Ixlol, whose vote had saved my own life, and for Canich who loved her. 'O great and mighty king, naught can I add to the noble words of Canich, my blood-brother, save that gladly would I lead your army against these seekers of revenge, ere we sacrifice the life of your noble daughter to their gods,' I said.

"So the messengers, after many insulting words and threats, returned to Lacan without Ixlol; and Canich and I made haste to prepare our warriors to defend Zacna.

"It was without fear that I went forth to meet the enemy, but with one regret; that no opportunity had been mine to send even a message of love to the Princess Ixkan. She neither sent for me nor appeared in the court during my presence there.

"Twice had I been warned against accepting her love; and at times a cruel fear wrenched at my heart. But only for a passing moment which left me shamed with the disloyalty of my moment's doubt. My love for her reasoned thus; certain motives had prompted those warnings which I had no cause to heed. Perchance Nicte, in her own greater love for the dark prin-

cess and knowing of her love for me, sought to win that for her mistress which her heart most desired—my love. And Ixlol—might she not be jealous of my love for Ixkan—and could not a jealous woman deny even her own sister? Thus did I stumble on, blindly heeding naught but the bond which drew me ever closer to the fair princess, like the fly so cunningly dazzled by the beauty and frailness of the spider's web."

CHAPTER XIX

"AFTER some days we received information from our spies, that a great army of Lacans were coming to attack us, so we marched our army for two days beyond the city and occupied a hill of considerable size. After reaching this favorable position we went into camp, giving our warriors a rest after their arduous march, so that they would be fresh and ready for the terrible battle which we knew would take place.

"The eye of day had lighted the earth but twice, when its brightness struck the points of many thousands of spearheads and shone upon the same number of shields. Well was it that we had quickly occupied this hill, for with the coming light we could see the camp of the enemy below and but the space of half a *kin's* march from us, where they had stopped and were forming their great army of warriors into compact lines, with others still behind them to take their place, should they fall in battle.

"We formed our warriors into three sides of a square, thick and unbroken; while on the fourth, or back, sat the king in an open palanquin above which four bearers held a large canopy, from the top of which floated many streamers of colored ribbon. About the king were grouped the nobles, *batabs* and *holcans,* Canich and I being with them.

"Outside and back of this square were the priests and servants of the temples, clad in their ceremonial robes of the purest white. Ornaments of jade and other costly stones adorned their necks and some of them

wore fearful masks on their faces. Here, too, were the horn blowers, the beaters of drums and the bearers of images, chief among them being that of *Yum Batel,* the god of war, to assure us of protection and victory in battle. In ringing chants, they sang the battle songs of the Itzas.

"For the space of many hours had we, who stood about him, taken council with the king as to what our moves of warfare would be, until now all was ready. Then, as was the custom, the king arose to speak to his warriors, while the blowers of horns and beaters of drums were silent.

" 'Hear, O warriors,' he cried, raising his right arm with his *caluac* above his head. 'Know you that while one sat upon the throne, who came before me, did the peoples of *Luumilkay* and Lacan make a bond of peace between themselves and with each other, to last even unto the end of all things, so that all might hunt on the line of these two lands in safety.

" 'But their purpose grew weak and once more was their strife in our land with those of the south. So was one sent, even my own daughter, the Princess Ixlol, to form a stronger bond by her marriage with the prince of Lacan. Now was he departed to his gods and she is blamed for his going and for this they come to us in war.

" 'In her defense must our army be strong against them. The victory must be ours that our nation may live in peace to the end. Well do I know the strength of your arms and the firmness of your hearts; therefore, do I call upon you to make this day one worthy to be written in stone, to our glory!'

"As the king's voice ceased, Canich raised his right hand and all the warriors took up the cry of the royal

salute: *'Bolonahau! Bolonahau!* Nine times king!' until the air about us was filled with the sound. Already have I told you, *batab,* how great a man with words was this king, and so he proved himself once more this day; though be it said for his speech, the warriors seemed to feel within them an added power from it.

"The king then seated himself, and all set themselves to make ready for the enemy when it should move forward to give us battle.

"Now came a sound like that of the god of thunder, *Ekahau,* as the enemy called loudly the battle cries and advanced to meet us. Firmly we stood our ground and watched them come . . . on and on . . . nearer and nearer . . . and as they came, their numbers which were like the leaves on the trees seemed to increase, until the earth below us was covered with them.

"Up the hill they came, singing and shouting, spears clattering upon shields, the brightness of their crested helmets in the sun nearly closing our eyes for a time to the light. But their way up the hill was slower than it had been on the floor of the valley, and it was seen that their breaths grew hard from the climb and the weight of their armor. As they came nearer, their singing changed to a battle cry of 'Lacan! Lacan! *Tokchac! Chactok!*'

"The sound of it made our warriors impatient to be at them. When they were but a short distance away, the king, in keeping with our plan of battle, gave a command to certain of our men—those whose skill was greatest since they had taken part in many battles before—and they dashed forward from the lines, holding high their great war clubs filled with prongs of flint; with loud cries did they throw themselves

upon the enemy. The Lacans fought with equal skill and determination.

"Indeed had the time come for me to test the progress I had made in training the warriors for the fight. Canich, I lost sight of, for I gave both my eyes to my own men and the full strength of my voice to sending them forward into the lines of the enemy. At the space of every second came the sound like the breaking open of the earth's surface as foe came face to face with foe; and he who could first raise the *toktunich,* flint-pronged axe, used it to good purpose, so that his enemy fell to the ground with broken skull.

"In other places our dart-throwers, with the aid of the *hulche* and their strong arms, kept up a stream of darts, so that they fell on the foe like water from the upturned vase of the heavens.

"Back and forth waved the two lines of warriors, now driven almost to the valley's level, then advancing once more up the side of the hill.

"Though we brought up our second and third lines of men, there seemed to be no breaking the depth of the enemy's ranks; and after some hours of fighting, they at last held us to the top of the hill.

"Here we stood our ground and the warfare went on, until it seemed there would be no strength left in any man's arm. The pile of dead grew higher each moment until it formed a wall the height of a man. Over the top of this, we fought the enemy.

"So it went on, *batab,* the scene growing in horror with the passing of the hours. The blood of their enemy covered the warriors on both sides with a coat of red. Men's breaths came from them with pain. Some wore faces that were hard as though carven from stone, others fought with their mouths open. All about us lay

the dead and the wounded who sought to drag themselves out of the path of battle, sending forth child-like cries, like those of the bird named *Coz*.

"Then, when *Hunabku,* the god of all, felt that he could no longer look upon this destruction of man by man, he sent darkness upon the earth to stay the hands of the warriors. It was as if words of common consent had been spoken and both armies drew back, each to its own camping place, for the night.

"As the sun went down over the edge of the earth, its face was no more red than was the covering of blood over all the battlefield, dark and horrible-looking. Then the rising moon changed its color to grey on which the faces of many dead warriors lay like flowers upon the bosom of the water.

"That evening we sat in meeting with the *Holcans,* chiefs of companies, around the fires of the camp and planned for the next day's battle. Well did we know that victory must be ours on that day, else the overwhelming numbers of the enemy would wear us down and sweep us backward until they overran the fair land of *Luumilkay*. For things now began to look alarming to us.

"We decided to put to trial a desperate plan of warfare which Canich and I had planned. If it did not win for us, then was our end in sight. Impatiently, the men awaited our words. After all was ready, Canich arose and spoke to those remaining after the first day's bloody conflict.

"His first words were of praise for their loyalty and their strength of arms. 'But now,' said he, 'must we put to the test a plan of battle which will mean certain death for many among you, and death to all of us if it fails. Your lives will be the sacrifice that must be made,

that victory shall be ours and the land of *Luumilkay* be forever safe and peaceful.

" 'Because of this, none shall be commanded with loud words to join a band of those who will become the bridegrooms of death. None shall call them cowards who do not give their words. Choose among you who will join this band and as each makes his choice let him step across the line that I have drawn before you.'

"No more was this said than with a mighty rush the warriors moved forward to cross the line as though they were but one. Canich raised his hand as a sign that they should stop, for each man vied with his neighbor to cross the line first.

" 'Hold, my brave warriors,' he shouted. 'All of you may not join this desperate enterprise. Let each captain choose from his company his most skilled fighters, until a company has been formed among them.'

" 'Canich! Ahmen! We follow to the death—even to the gates of *Metnal!*' they shouted, and know you, *batab,* when they said this it meant much, for *Metnal* is the same as the white man's Hell.

"As they had spoken, we knew that they would fight to their end, and in our hearts grew hope. Then when he had made more clear to them the plan whereby we would try to weaken the arms of the enemy and cause them to drop their weapons of war and return in defeat to their own land, we bade them seek rest as best they might until the first hour of another day.

"I, too, laid myself down, but the god of sleep at first refused to visit me, for the reason that many thoughts ran through my mind. Well did I know that tomorrow's sun would, perhaps, be the last I should look upon. Then did I think of the fair Ixkan, to wonder what her thoughts must be at this time. Were they

for me? And if this was so, had the thought of the danger in which I now stood, caused her to close her mind to all else save our love? I gave silent thanks that I had sipped of the cup held to my lips by the goddess *Ixyacunah,* before my days on earth should end.

"Thinking thus brought my mind peace and finally my eyes closed in sleep.

"Before all the rays of the sun had lighted the earth, came action from the enemy. Like the movement of an animal sure of its prey, they crept toward us and, from our high place, we could see their many companies, each with its banner of war.

"And when but the distance of a thousand steps away, they stopped. Now all their companies formed into one thick mass, in the center of which we could see their king in his palanquin. Their plan was to come upon us in one solid body, hoping thus to cover us like a wave of the great ocean and bring us to a state of disorder and defeat.

"But now, we too, had a plan of war, of which they knew naught, and stood ready to put it to the test.

"When at last they had formed according to their plan, an order was spoken by their king and, like howling demons, they started toward us, coming with great force to overwhelm us and carry all before them.

"Slowly, and with a set purpose, the center of our front lines fell back to either side. Into this space rushed the Lacans until they filled it, and more to overcome us they turned to left and right. Thus were there ranks parted, leaving their king in view before our eyes.

"Now had come the time for the final act. At the head of the picked body of men formed to the shape of a great spear-head, I took my place. Swiftly, we dashed

forward like a well-thrown dart from the hand of a skillful warrior, to where stood the palanquin of their king. Not until we were close upon him, did his warriors read the meaning of our purpose. Then went up a loud cry among them, 'The king! The king!'

"Many of my brave men were left behind me on the way, but being the spear-point, I knew there must be no pause of my feet and fighting fiercely, I forged my way ahead, the warriors following me and fighting according to our set plan.

"As I neared the palanquin of the king of Lacan, fear gave speed to the feet of his bearers and they fled, dropping him to the ground. But he was quickly on his feet, and met me as I struck at him. Then we fought, each armed with the *Nohtoktunich,* the great flint-studded axe.

"Oah, *batab,* never have you seen a fight like this. For the king, I will say he was no coward and he returned blow for blow until both our weapons were shorn of flint teeth and we were fighting with bare clubs.

"Once did I come near to the end of myself when he, with a clever stroke, missed my head only by the breadth of a hair. Finally did his strokes become of less force, for my years were fewer than his and the movements of my body quicker, so that at the last the fight was not quite even and he came to his end from a well directed blow of my axe.

"At sight of this, a mournful wail rent the air from the lines of the enemy, 'The king is dead! The king is dead!' Their *holcans* strove hard to bring them once more to order, but soon came their ends also. Many were held by fear to the ground so that they did not move. Others turned and fled, running as do the deer

from the jaguar, casting aside their weapons and armor as they went, that their speed might be greater.

"Still did our men do battle with those that remained, until the ground under our feet was wet and slippery with blood, as though heavy rains had fallen. Soon there were no Lacan warriors, save their dead, left upon the field.

"The god of war was with us and so was our plan successfully carried out, ending in a space of two days, a battle that might well have lasted for many more. Though the payment demanded by the god of war was nearly as great in our land as in that of the enemy, still did we know many lives had been saved by it.

"For many *uinals,* the city of Zacna seemed without life, under its cloak of mourning, for few indeed were the homes that had not lost one or more, and the shouts of victory were drowned in the wailing and cries of sorrow for the dead.

"You will question, *paal batab,* and doubtless wonder that I was not among those who on this day surrendered their lives to the god of war; but it was not so. For what purpose I was spared, save for another fate, I knew not. Yet did both Canich and I suffer naught but wounds, which soon were healed. This was not because we sought to preserve our lives, for side by side we fought with our men through all the battle.

"For myself, I have spoken, telling the part which was mine in the plan which brought us victory. If my words of Canich have been less, his deeds were not so. Though all he did, I saw not, yet was it told me later by others when peace was once more upon the land.

"When the wounds which we had received in battle were fully healed, Canich and I were bidden to the pal-

ace and into the presence of the king. There, before the nobles gathered together, did he bestow upon me for the bravery of my deeds in battle and my successful plan of warfare, a title of rank equal to that of Canich. He set about the neck of each of us a chain of gold on which hung a medallion of priceless *yaxtun,* bearing on its face a carving of the seal of royalty, and he spake equal words of praise into our ears. So that now my standing in the land was as great as that of my blood-brother, for in the same manner, the honor which raised up Canich, also raised me to his side.

"No word of the Princess Ixlol had come to my ears since our victory in battle with the Lacans; yet this day I saw that she sat once more in her place at the left of the king who was now willing to look upon her again with favor, since the cause of the trouble between them was now ended in his favor.

"At the last of the ceremony, the king proclaimed that a great feast should be held throughout *Luumilkay* within the space of two suns, to which all in the land were invited.

"This my ears heard with joy, because had it not been for the courage of our warriors in battle, the praise given to Canich and me at this time, would have been as naught—so was some reward their due. This, too, was the thought of Canich, and he spoke of it as we walked together from the palace after the ceremony. On the streets did the people acclaim us great warriors and sing songs of praise for having saved the land from the Lacans.

" 'Praise such as this works some ill, as well as good, to the one who receives it; for it belonged not wholly to us but to the warriors who stood side by side with us in battle,' Canich said. When I had agreed to this,

he added: 'For this cause, I trust that the people will soon forget the war, in the interest of other things.'

"Then, as was often the way with him, he grew silent and did not speak again until we came to his house, where we sat in the garden while meat and drink were placed before us.

" 'Saw you the face of Ekchan today?' Canich then asked me.

"I replied that I had, and spoke of the fact that many times had I seen his eyes upon the face of the Princess Ixkan, striving to draw her gaze; and I had wondered what purpose was now in the mind of the Black Serpent.

" 'His look declares not a lasting peace for our land,' Canich went on. 'Now that he has looked upon the good work of our warriors, I fear he would stir up strife among them by calling their attention to the praise of the people bestowed upon us. In this way, he would seek to make them rebellious, thus causing dissatisfaction by false words. So, too, does he seek to win the throne of *Luumilkay*.'

" 'This is a matter of much weight—surely one that the king should hear about!' I said quickly.

"But with this Canich agreed not. 'Who am I,' he said, 'that I should speak to the king against the son of his own brother, and declare him guilty of that which has not been proven?"

"And I knew that it was so. All that could be done in this matter, until Ekchan showed his hand therein, we must do ourselves. Above all must we keep close watch to see that none seek to turn from us the affection and loyalty of our warriors, nor that they be tempted by false words to favor Ekchan.

"So did we agree to do, ere we parted that evening.

"Two suns hence, in the vast reception hall of the palace, was the main feast set on tables which, as usual, were placed so that they formed three sides of a square, with the fourth one open.

"At this table, as in all great functions, sat the councilors, the nobles of the land and those of high office among the warriors, while the king, the two princes on his right and Canich and I on his left, was seated at the center of the table.

"This being the first time I had attended a feast in the reception hall of the palace, my eyes were keen for such splendor. Especially did I see the huge round bowl of solid gold for holding *balche,* and the six cups that went with it. These were for the use of the king and his daughters, and perchance some favored guest. This day did Canich and I, as honored guests at the feast, both drink from these cups.

"At the left of me sat Ekchan. When I turned to greet him, I saw that the smile on his countenance was false and one that spoke of secret thoughts beneath, but no heed did I pay to his actions, until words of his aroused in me many questionings and fears: 'Great is the honor of the victorious warrior, and well deserved; but as he gains, so often does he lose. The honors bestowed upon one who is not so favored by the king in battle, bids fair to rival any received by the bravest of our warriors.'

" 'Perchance even as you would not seek to exchange honors with me, even so would I not with you,' I gave him word for word; but my reason doubted my own words, so that the brightness of the day was dimmed for me.

"For a time all of those about the tables were busy with the food and drink, which was served by bearers whose coming and going to bring fresh supplies never

ceased. As the bowls of *balche* and *xtabentun* were emptied, the tongues of the drinkers became loosened and the flow of their words became free.

"Then came dancers and players of music to entertain us. Many dancing girls, each one of great beauty, circled the tables and filled the open spaces of the room left for their use. They danced and twisted their bodies with strange movements that brought back to me those pictures of females on the walls of temples I had seen in the deserted ancient cities. Their bodies were for the most part bare, and with smiles and graceful gestures did they seek attention from now one man and then another, who, as they danced about, threw gold bells to them that tinkled as they struck the floor.

"Near the end of the feast, the king, who had drunk but little of the flowing cups, arose and spoke once more as he had at the ceremonials, of the bravery of his two commanders of ten thousand spears, and gave thanks for the loyalty of their warriors. He also gave thanks to the god of war who had been with us in the battle and had brought us victory.

"As these words came forth from the mouth of the king, Canich looked at me and the same power within us both, turned our eyes upon Ekchan. His eyes were fixed upon Ixkan, as if to measure the effect of the king's words upon her, and though he sat forward the better to see her face, yet if she saw his gaze she gave no sign. Seeing the look of Ekchan thus upon the fair Ixkan, a blackness came before me. Then he looked at me and for a space did we two hold each other, eye to eye, until his voice broke the silence that had been filled with meaning.

"Turning his face toward Canich, he thus addressed him: 'How feels it, Canich, to be acclaimed through-

out the land this day as one of its greatest warriors?' and his tones held in them not a little of scorn. I awaited the reply with uneasiness.

" 'That I cannot say,' Canich answered in a quiet voice, yet with such clearness that all about us ceased talking to listen, 'for such is not my thought. Whoever would bestow upon me, alone, such honor, wrongs those whose valiant fighting gave us our victory.' Thus did Canich turn from himself all praise, and lay it upon our warriors.

"Though his question was answered, Ekchan was not yet content. He laughed loudly, looked around upon those who were listening, and said:

" 'Hear you the words of one who would turn aside the praise bestowed upon him by his king!'

" 'Only to place it upon his warriors,' Canich interrupted. 'To them I prove myself, not by words, but by deeds.'

" 'Well said,' came the voice of the king, and the look of high respect he cast upon Canich was not lost to the eyes of Ekchan.

"As the feast and ceremonies ended, I passed through a corridor leading by a short route to the street of the *ochkay*. As I reached the arched doorway I turned to look down a side path, thinking that it would be a still shorter way to the main street. As I turned I beheld Ixkan and Ekchan standing close together with words coming and going fast between them. But when I noticed that Ekchan's face was black with something which did not please him, hope arose once more within me. Not wishing to spy upon them I passed quickly on.

"The eye of day had lost its heat and was beginning its downward journey and several times I stopped in my walking to look upon the beauties of the palace

gardens, which the fast-dying light had now covered with a cloak of softest hue.

"Being overwrought by the greatness of the praises I had received, I decided to walk on for a time in the cool of the evening air. I thought myself alone until, suddenly, I knew another was nearby. This I sensed, for no footfall could have been heard upon the grass. Turning, and peering in the twilight, I beheld the Princess Ixkan, and my heart stirred, though truly I knew not what was strongest within me at sight of her—joy or fear—being uncertain of her feelings toward me at this time. So I waited without speech.

"Coming close, she lifted her face to mine. The soft light—which I now believed was kept for me alone—was in her eyes, and softly her lips spoke my name.

"With the word, my arms were about her and for the space of a long moment was she held close to my breast, though we spoke no word. This seemed to be all we asked of the goddess *Ixyacunah;* save that, ere long, my lips sought Ixkan's and hers answered me. The intense emotion which surged within me caused me to forget that but a short time before I had seen her in earnest conversation with one whom I hated.

" 'And—you will come to me tonight, when the city is still?' she asked, though well must she have known what my answer would be.

"I have ever found it is a woman's wish, *paal batab,* to hear the spoken words. So ere we parted for the time, I told her: 'I shall come, though it be from the Ninth Heaven itself. No power is there strong enough to stay my feet, nor hold me back!'

"As I left her my feet scarce touched the ground; for once more would I be alone with her when the city slept, and naught but the voice of the night birds would be heard."

CHAPTER XX

"BUT it was not the will of the gods that Zacna should dwell in peace after our hard earned victory; and the pleasant sounds of the feast had scarce died away when murmurings and threatenings again filled the air.

"Our victory in the war with the Lacans had added greatly to the king's pride in himself. Feeling doubly sure of his power in the land, he now sought to weaken the influence of the priests among the people and change to his own will certain important regulations. He sought to do this for the good of the people and also to increase his prestige with the nobles.

"For many *tuns* before the recent war, peace and plenty had favored the kingdom, and the nobles, being the chiefs and leaders of the warriors, had fallen into ways of idleness. Extravagances of every kind, immorality and gambling had become their chief pursuits. For this reason, many of them had become impoverished and they called loudly to the king for relief.

"Now the priesthood, through their increasing power and influence, had acquired much of the nobles' properties and thereby, had become so influential that the king was jealous of their power and even feared that the word of the high priest would become as great as, or greater than, his own. When these chiefs and nobles now came to him, crying loudly that their lands and property be restored, the king heeded their words and called upon the priests to return that which they had taken. This they refused to do, saying that they

had come by it fairly and that in their hands it was but a trust for the people of the nation.

"The king's anger was aroused at the refusal of the priests to do his bidding and the matter became a common one throughout the land. The people took sides with the priests, and opposed the king and the nobles. So the quarrel grew, despite the attempts to stop it by those who looked on with silent disfavor; chief among these were Canich and myself.

"But one there was who found these happenings to his liking. It was for such a time as this that Ekchan had waited, and he was more than pleased to see it come. Now did he seek the ears of the priests and gain their favor, urging them on until they were ready to battle with him against the king.

"Though Canich and I watched closely the actions of our warriors and sought to hold them all to us, while we drilled in secret to be prepared for sudden trouble, many proved disloyal and favored the side of those who opposed the king. Among them were not a few of our best trained men who were skillful in the arts of warfare. These, Ekchan put over others of his followers and they trained them until before a great time had passed, the priesthood had at their support an army of no mean skill or number.

"At this time, Ekchan gave out that he was going on a big hunting trip for the jaguar, and left the city, taking with him great numbers of men. Even then, the king, in his pride, would hear naught of disloyalty, though well he knew of the discontent of the priests and the low talking of the people. In a short time he could no longer hide the fact from himself that many hundreds were leaving to rally to the support of the standard of Ekchan and the disloyal priests.

"Then, filled with apprehension, he sought to stop this desertion by placing strong guards at the gates of the city to hold the people within. But already was it too late, for many had already left Zacna and were now gathered about Ekchan.

"Within five suns came a messenger from the high priest, Ahkin, to the city of Zacna bearing fateful words. No longer would Cocom be king; but a greater man and braver warrior would sit upon his throne ere long. The message said also, that unless all who opposed the will of the high priest had left the city within two suns to join the army of Ekchan, the king-to-be, then would he descend from the hills and destroy them to a man.

"This message turned the pride of the king to an anger which came from the depths of a wounded heart; for was not Ekchan the only son of his once well-loved brother? Yet this would not stay his arm from striking the blow in defense of his throne. For, like many who are for peace, if opposed, he would fight fiercely to protect himself and his followers.

"It was then that Ixkan bade me come to her without delay and as always with willing feet did I obey her. Scarce had I entered her chambers when she flung herself upon my breast and besought me with tears that filled her lovely eyes: 'Ahmen, go not in this battle against Ekchan; for surely will you lose your life!'

" 'Fear not, beloved,' I sought to calm her fears. 'Did I not return safely from the terrible battle with the Lacans? The god of war favors me even as the goddess of love—for you, my princess.'

" 'But well I know that this fight will be different and far more dangerous. There is treachery and plotting among men who should fight together. Surely will

Ekchan gain the victory and the throne, for besides his own great army, the priests favor him and bring to his banners a mighty host. But I have planned a way to conquer him. I have not been idle while I watched the approach of this pending storm. Not so idly will I let my throne be seized by another. If you will but trust me and do that which I ask—Ahmen?' she pleaded softly.

" 'Trust you, gladly, and do your bidding if the gods will it possible,' I promised.

" 'But, Ahmen, did you not accept my love with your promise to obey and protect me?'

" 'Aye, fair one, so far as your commands would lead to your protection.'

" 'Would you now seek to retreat from your promise when I have fulfilled mine?'

" 'Nay—speak, my own. What would you have me to do?'

" 'Join the forces of Ekchan, that he may be victorious against the king, and with my help you will win favor in his sight and be placed in command of his army even as you are now one of the king's commanders. But one word from you and your warriors will follow. Leave the rest to me, Ahmen. For when you are in command of the victorious army, then shall we set aside Ekchan. Then I, being the queen of *Luumilkay,* will cry loudly to the people that Ekchan has attempted to seize the throne of my father, which now rightfully belongs to me. Thus will I bring to our banners the people who love me, and also will I, by clever promises, bring the priests to our side. Then long shall we dwell together to rule over *Luumilkay,* when all my plans are completed. But if you obey not this command, Ekchan has vowed to end your life in this battle,

or after; and if he should conquer the king, without you—then what of me?' Again tears filled her eyes.

"Now the voice of duty to King Cocom held me firm as it bade me to heed not her words, and though the strength of Ixkan's arms about my neck seemed greater than the voice for a moment, its very steadfastness at last filled me with rebellion.

"For a moment I submitted myself to the purpose of the fair maid, but even as my lips dwelt on hers, reason returned to me and I put her gently from me.

"Lifting her face to mine, Ixkan looked upon me with question in her eyes; then doubtless saw the look of purpose in mine and heard it in the tones of my voice.

" 'Nay, Princess,' I said, 'for the words of duty are strong in my ears—'

" 'So! it is "Princess" once more!' she broke in upon me in tones that were filled with scorn. She stepped back and her eyes were clouded with wrath. 'Such is your honor and obedience to duty. If you would betray the king as you have betrayed me, to whom your duty is the greater, he were now passed from this life and lost to his throne!'

" 'Oh, believe me,' I pleaded. 'It is that I would serve you also in my duty to the king. For, even as we gained the victory over the Lacans, so shall we win this battle.'

" 'Then you have no faith in my words, no trust in my plans for your safety and our love together,' she sobbed.

" 'Not that!' I answered. 'But I cannot now betray the king who has bestowed upon me such honor, and Canich, my blood-brother, whose faith in me is as—'

" 'Then I have bestowed upon you no honors, no faith—'

" 'O my Princess, believe me, for my heart is torn asunder that I cannot obey your command in this matter.' Pleading with her thus, I went close, and my arms would have gone about her, but with hers outstretched she held me off. No longer did her eyes hold the warmth of which I had many times drunk deeply. Now they were wide and cold like those of the image in our temple of the god who covers the mountain-tops with white.

" 'If you leave me now, there will be no return, even though you live,' she told me furiously. 'I thought my love given into the keeping of one who would hold it against all else, yet already do you fail me! Another, so favored, would have kept his promise!'

"With bowed head I listened to her words, and replied, 'Even for you, I cannot become a traitor to the king,' and raised my head to depart from her presence; when I found that she no longer looked upon me with anger, but that her face was tender with smiles, and she held out her arms to me. The vision dazzled me and as in a dream of puzzled thought I heard her voice, again sweet and tender:

" 'Such loyalty is yours, Ahmen, as few men possess; and proud am I to hold the love of such a man. Forgive me, but I had to test you harshly, though it well nigh broke my heart to do so, and a great fear held me that you would not prove true in the test, as I prayed the gods that you would. In this great issue between the king and one who seeks to usurp the throne, my throne, I would prove that I can depend upon you in any matter. Your loyalty is henceforth beyond my doubt and great honor shall fall to you for such firm-

ness of mind. It was indeed a hard test to which I put you, and well I know it, Ahmen.'

"So great was my relief to find that she had but subjected me to a test—for even as the last words had fallen from my lips, I had all but faltered at the thought of losing her love—that I felt like a man who is suddenly snatched from a whirlpool which is pulling him down to certain death. But no more did she cause fear to linger within my breast as she clasped me in her arms and held me close—close.

"Then she put me from her gently, saying, 'Now must I seek my couch for rest, for tomorrow will much be demanded of my strength. May the gods protect you and bring you back safely even as they did in the battle with the Lacans.' She kissed me tenderly and her face was sad at my leaving. Then was I filled with joy, for now more firmly I held her love because of my loyalty to her father.

"Not again did I see the fair princess until upon a day of days after.

"So, once more did we prepare our warriors for war, and this time with deep sorrow in our hearts. Now would brother strike at brother, and father would come face to face with son upon this battlefield. There was also a fear that not all might remain loyal to us even now. How could we know in this strife of people within the same city whether there might not be those among us who only feigned loyalty to the king to gain their own ends? Heavier my heart seemed than my armor when on the day appointed, Canich and I marched our warriors outside the city, and the king again took his place at the head of the army. It was a day of great beauty, not one to be disfigured by war. As we marched

forth, the small creatures of the earth rose up to make way for our coming. In the branches of the trees, the birds made music. Slowly did the *kin* appear to smile over a peaceful world that, ere his going, would be filled with death and horror.

"When we had come to the great plain outside the city, our warriors were lined up and, as he had done before in the battle with the Lacans, so now did the king rise from his palanquin to speak to the men. Before the words came, first his keen eye went from one to another of the different groups, seeing those who were present and thus knowing those with whom we should soon engage in warfare.

" 'Today, my warriors, shall we decide the fate of the Maya nation!' he told them, and this time his words rang truer in my ears than ever before. Perhaps it was because this matter concerned him more deeply than had any other.

" 'It rests upon your valor whether our names be written upon the stone tablets of history, or whether they be trampled in the dust by the disloyal feet of those we meet today upon this battlefield. Shall our names and the nation, again strike terror to the hearts of those who would rebel against us? From the heavens above, the gods and the fathers of the Mayas are looking down upon you. Fight, warriors!— Fight, Mayas! —that your nation be united as in ancient days.'

"A great cry from the warriors answered him. Holding their weapons of war in both hands, they raised them on high and out toward the king, as a sign of their loyalty and their intent to stand with him to the very end. Then the sound of their voices ceased, as they waited for him to go on.

" 'I, the king, stand with you this day, for victory or defeat as the gods may decide. Now may the great deified *Itzamna,* who was first to join our tribes into one great unity, increase the strength of your arms against the rebellious ones of our nation!'

"As the voice of the king ceased, from the throats of the warriors came their war-song, in tones of thunder:

'Eaters of Jaguars, are we.
Sharp and cutting are our claws,
As were those of our fathers
In the days of Itzamna!'

"As though in answer, from the hills came the sound of many feet, while yet a cloud of dust hid the oncoming warriors from us. Then the sun striking through it, hit their shields and helmets and revealed them to our sight.

"At this, our warriors with a great shout, sprang into line and stood ready, the song of war growing louder and louder upon their lips as the visions of bloodshed became more clear before their eyes.

"When the enemy was but the distance of a few hundred hands away, our warriors could no longer be held back, and in advance of the king's command they rushed forward, clashing their spears against their shields.

"Now came the sounds and sights of battle; the stabbing, cutting and twisting strokes of the obsidian-bladed weapons; the tearing of human flesh and the flowing of blood; the heavy breathing of men and the horrible crunch of skulls broken in by the battle-axe; the cries of battle lost in the moans of the wounded and the dying.

"Oah, it was a sight horrible to see. For this cause, perhaps, did the gods declare it should soon be finished, since this was not the force of one nation against another, but the warriors of one land divided against themselves.

"Those on our side fought bravely and each of their blows spoke truly, so that victory seemed near. Then, without warning, though even as we had feared from the first it might happen, did one great company of those who fought at my command, suddenly cross to the lines of the enemy and turning, did battle against us.

"At sight of this, I became as one turned to stone. I looked about me, to find there remained but a small number of loyal warriors at my command. Canich with his men was fighting some little distance away.

" 'Traitors!' I shouted above the din, seeking in this way to bring shame upon those who had turned against us, but they were already gone and my voice but cut the empty air.

"As the noise of the battle receded, a sound of laughter answered me and, looking toward the lines of the enemy, into which my warriors had melted, I saw Ekchan in their front.

" 'Nay!' he cried. 'Not traitors. These are but they whom you held within the city against their will, since their hearts were with me in my cause.'

"Now did the anger within me grow until I could no longer hold it and before my eyes there came a curtain of red, shutting out the sight of all else save the jeering face of Ekchan.

" 'If that be so, then did I rightly name them traitors, and you the foulest of them all!' I shouted at him.

'Prepare to defend yourself, for I swear that only for the space of a few breaths more will the blood flow in your veins ere I send it dripping upon the ground.' As I shouted these words, I rushed forward to meet him, man to man.

"Oah, *batab,* as our heavy battle axes, set with jagged teeth of flint, whirled about our heads ready to strike each the first blow, we must both have made a terrible spectacle, for the blood already dripped from the wounds we had suffered. Warily, we circled about, swinging our axes and holding our shields before us. And then with the speed of light, we struck at the same instant, so that the clang of blow upon blow striking the shields, and the whistle of the mighty axes as they swished through the air, continued. Then did my axe tear through the metal, wood and leather of Ekchan's shield, and in so doing, more than half of the flint teeth were broken off and fell to the ground or were left sticking in the torn shield.

"On the instant, he launched at me a furious side-swung stroke that made my heart leap into my throat, but I managed to jump clear as the blow passed within a finger's breadth of my uncovered neck. But in leaping back, I slipped on the bloody turf and only was I able to gain my feet ere he could take advantage of me because the force of his blow had swung him half-way around.

"Now we fought with greater caution. Blow met blow, parried with shield and club, and the axes were both entirely bare of their flinty teeth, leaving only the knotted heavy wood—still a terrible weapon fit to crush the thickest skull like the shell of an egg. Though for a time we were evenly matched, I could see that at

last Ekchan was weakening. His eyes grew feverishly bright and his lips pale, as a thin trickle of blood began to flow from his nostrils. His blows became weaker, but he still endured. As I stepped aside to avoid a blow from his axe, one of his warriors, seeing he was about to be defeated, came from behind me without warning and struck me a cowardly blow with a war club. I fell —to the ground, or was it farther—then I knew no more."

CHAPTER XXI

"AH, *paal batab,* my spirit had not fled—as I often wished that it had in the days which followed—for when I again saw light, it was very faint, and a woman was weeping over me. For the moment, within my hazy mind, I thought that it was Ixkan, whom I loved; but when I stirred and she spoke to me anxiously, I found it was but Ixlol.

" 'Where are we?' I asked.

" 'In the great cave near the battlefield, where the king retired after battle to rest. He is at the front, sleeping. The fires of the guard but dimly reflect this far back, for beyond is a turn in the dark passage. Above you is also an opening, which was once covered with stones, through which you must have fallen during the battle, taking many stones with you—for see, they are all about you. O Ahmen, beloved, I thought you dead. I had stopped to kiss you a last farewell, when you stirred again to life.'

" 'How came you here?' I inquired, attempting weakly to push her from me in my disappointment that she was not Ixkan.

" 'I came early this morn to see the king, if all was well with him. At the rear end of the cave is a little shrine where a door gives secret entrance to this passageway leading onward past here to the king's retreat at the mouth of the cave, which overlooks the valley.'

" 'How went the battle?'

" 'The war was ended and quickly, and the king rests. But O Ahmen, think no more of war but of thyself. Even you, should you not die from your wounds,

must face punishment, degradation and even death for the desertion of your warriors in the king's ranks. Know you not that, according to the rules of the land, a chieftain is responsible for the deeds of his warriors?'

"The pain of my wounds and the disgrace left little desire in me to live and I said, 'Ah, Princess, what matter if one more goes to his death in this slaughter of brother against brother and friend against friend?'

"She bowed her head, weeping pitifully. 'What matter, you say? Ah, because my love would plead for you at any cost. Think you not I would gladly give my life for yours? Flee from it all this night, Ahmen! None knows of your presence here in this dark hole where you may remain in safety until the day becomes night and the shadows lay heavy upon the land. Then, before the moon rises above the tree-tops may you escape by a secret path beneath the ground which I know, that afterward leads to a great forest and by a devious road to the foot of a mountain. Climbing the mountain through a dense wood uninhabited by man, will you reach the top of a high cliff where we may descend to freedom by a long rope which I shall bring to you. From thence shall we journey north, ever north, until we reach the land of your people, to dwell forever in happiness!'

"Her words sorely tempted me to leave this blood-stained land where I should surely meet my death anyway, though must I leave Ixkan, to mourn my passing. Why could not the gods have sent Ixkan, my love, to minister to me when I fell beneath the ground into this dark hole? Her love surely would have given her pity for me so that she would have offered me the same path that Ixlol now planned for me, and gladly would I have accepted the plan from her.

"I sought to raise my body from the ground, and with the help of Ixlol I succeeded. She pushed a large, flat stone behind my back that I might lean against it. Thus I sat with smarting wounds, thinking on the path to freedom that she offered me. If I still held my life within me, I thought mayhap I might even return with others heavily armed and take Ixkan back to my own country where we might live in peace and happiness until the end. To Ixlol I told these thoughts, and she gave me quick answer:

" 'It is strange, Ahmen, that your thoughts must ever be of the love you carry in your heart for my sister. But my love for you is not for self, and my thoughts are only for your welfare; but be that as it comes, I should rather save you for my sister than to see you laid upon the stone of sacrifice for naught. Therefore, though I lose you for myself, after I have led you safely to freedom, I shall bid you goodbye and return to my own land.' These words she whispered with a sob in her voice, and even then, *paal batab,* was I ashamed; but still strong was my purpose, though I thought somewhat on this freedom offered me.

"Now did I sit in silence for a long time, still thinking on her words. Then out of the darkness that closed about us, came words from her mouth, encouraged by my silence:

" 'Oh, Ahmen,' she whispered, 'If I read your thoughts aright, you will accept my plan.'

"I had only formed the words of acceptance, when in the dim light on the path beyond us, we saw a shadowy form passing.

"Peering after the intruder, Ixlol straightened up and gasped, 'Ixkan, my sister!'

" 'Why walks she here beneath the ground?' I asked quickly.

" 'Mayhap, like me, she desires to know if all is well with the king.'

" 'Think you she saw us here?'

" 'Nay, Ahmen, she but looked straight ahead.'

"And now, *paal batab,* did I commit a dastardly act which haunted me ever after and for which I have said many prayers. Like all things which come from the underworld, it was whispered into my ears by *Ahpuch,* which you call the devil. Hoping that I might yet see Ixkan as she returned, and to hasten Ixlol's departure, I cried in a hoarse whisper, 'I go with you on your own conditions and you need not return, but go with me to that happy land. Now make haste to leave me lest thy sister discover you here with me. But return at the time of darkness in the outer world, prepared to guide me hence.' To add to my crime I kissed her on the lips and she left me, happy, thinking that I loved her in some measure.

"Obediently, she departed; and to avoid her sister, she took a side path, as you would call it, *batab,* a tunnel—leading to the entrance overlooking the valley, near to the place where rested the king. Before leaving me, she cautioned me to remain hidden where I had fallen, to which, in my deceit, did I readily agree.

"Shortly after she had left, I sought to rise, which I did by grasping the rough sides of the wall and after standing a moment to steady myself on my trembling legs, I staggered to the main path. I was sure that after Ixkan had visited her father, she would return by the way she had gone, to make exit through the shrine above. Thus would I meet her.

"It was as I had hoped; for scarcely had I reached

the center of the path she must traverse, when she came toward me, coming quite close before she saw me, because of the dim light. Then she stopped suddenly and looked searchingly in my direction.

" 'Fear not,' I whispered. 'It is but your own lover, Ahmen.' For a moment only she hesitated, then came quickly to me and threw her arms about me.

" 'Oh, Ahmen, my beloved,' she cried softly as does one filled with great emotion, that desires not to be heard. 'I have sought you everywhere and the gods have brought me to you, at last!'

" 'Saw you the king?'

" 'He sleeps and I would not disturb him from the rest he sorely needs.'

" 'Quick,' I exclaimed, 'come with me into the total darkness.'

"Then did I tell her of my plan for escape, which was in truth not mine, but her sister's, and she quickly fell to it, with great agitation which I had not noted before. But I saw that it was caused by her finding me there, and it pleased me greatly. Now that she had come to me, I forgot the pain of my wounds, the tragedy of the battle—everything.

"For some minutes she stood in silence; then as if by second thought she spake again:

" 'Ahmen, you love me much, do you not? You still love me as you did on that night when you ran from my chamber—and as you loved me after the goddess of love, *Ixyacunah,* had given you reason and told you to take the great love that I offered you?'

" 'Oah, my glorious Princess, my love at this moment is greater than ever before. Nothing in the world would I not do for you. Put me to the test again.' I had no mind left with which to reason, it seemed.

" 'Do you swear by the great god, *Itzamna,* that you now speak the truth?'

" 'I swear by all the gods of the world.'

" 'Then, my lover, I take you at your word. I desire you to take the life of a man.'

" 'In fair fight?' I questioned.

" 'I said not how, for it is not for you to question, but only to make truthful your words.'

" 'But, my Princess, never have I taken a life but in fair fight or in war. But should a man molest you, then would I kill.'

" 'If he molest you, my lover—what of that?'

" 'Still must it be a fair fight,' I answered.

" 'Would you kill a king who would take your life?'

"Now, *paal batab,* did I fail to answer quickly, for I saw that she desired only to save my life. It was her father that I must kill. I answered, 'I cannot kill a king or even one lower than a king, except he attempt to kill me unfairly.'

" 'And, my lover, is it fair to lay you upon the stone of sacrifice and offer your bleeding heart to the god of war when you have so faithfully served that king? Now listen well, Ahmen,' she pleaded. 'Do you wish to sit upon a throne beside me, your queen, and rule with me this land of *Luumilkay?* Or would you let that king kill you for the desertion of your warriors—and break my heart?'

" 'Nay, Princess, I cannot commit murder, even to be a king—and he does these things!'

" 'And lose me?' she pleaded wistfully.

" 'And lose you, if I must,' I repeated, though with great effort.

"Then did she become angry and give me many cutting words that lashed me like leather thongs: 'Oah,

thou poor cowardly one who has always loudly proclaimed your love for me. Little do I desire to sit on a throne beside a weakling who saves not his own worthless life for one he professes to love, one who swears by the sacred *Itzamna,* and lies. I go—and leave you for another more brave. Farewell, poor helpless mortal whom I thought had the courage of a jaguar, but has only that of the helpless *thul,'* and she turned as if to go.

"Oah, *batab,* I knew not what next to do, and in my desperation, I clutched at her arm.

" 'Wait, wait,' I cried in a loud whisper. 'What man awaits you who would kill a king for love of you?'

" 'Not one like you, Ahmen! But one awaits me above whom you know well.'

" 'Ekchan!' I exclaimed.

" 'Yea, and a braver man than you!' she taunted scornfully.

"A rage possessed me which was even stronger than my love for Ixkan. I thought—'Then he lives, for me to finish. There will be another day!' I vowed to myself. To Ixkan, I hissed, 'The instant you go above to meet this man, will I go forward and appraise the king's guard of thy intent!'

" 'And pray you, to what would this lead you, but to the stone of sacrifice? Call the guards even now if you will, and see what it will avail you. I go to Ekchan, who awaits me!'

"Again did I call her back and then, *batab,* with shame I tell you; when she threw her arms about me and her lips held mine for long I lost all reason. I felt myself weakening, but to no avail did I try to avoid my fall to her influence. The goddess of love held me firmly to Ixkan; and then and there I became as the

masa from which *tortillas* are made—soft and yielding. And I, poor weak flesh, did agree to murder her father lest he sacrifice me, and so that she might become a queen, and I rule beside her.

" 'Now, quick, quick, Ahmen, before your blood turns to water. Here I shall await you, and when it is done, we shall hasten to a place of safety that I know.'

"I braced myself for the horrible deed and walked as quickly toward the front of the cave as my shaking limbs would carry me. But even as I departed from her and her power over me, which was as the serpent's over its victim, I felt my reason return, and I asked myself, 'What kind of thing is this for me to attempt, who have always been honorable? Far better had I deserted the king and met him in open battle!' And even as I hesitated, I knew I could not do it—even in my love for Ixkan, or to spare my own life.

"Rather would I flee and seek to escape from the land, without Ixkan. I had not reached the entrance where rested the king, as I supposed, so I turned about with firm resolve to return where Ixkan awaited me, come what might. As I did so, I noticed a doorway at the right of the passage and I fancied I heard a moan as if one were in pain. I looked within. The room was but faintly lighted with candles of wax. In one corner, at the farther end, lay the form of a man; and I would have left noiselessly, when I again heard a moan—this time louder. I approached closer and saw, to my surprise, that it was the king lying upon a jaguar skin and then, with horror, I saw the gleam of a dagger hilt upright over the king's heart.

"Scarcely aware of my action, I stooped over him and impulsively drew it out. And at that very moment I discovered, from the nature of the serpent-headed

hilt, that the dagger was one of my own. As I grasped it, the king sent forth a great moan and, unwittingly, I added to the sound with my own gasp of dismay. The nearest of the king's guard, hearing the sounds, leaped quickly to the door, entered, and found me thus; holding in my hand my own dagger, dripping with the blood of the king!

"Oah, *batab,* but that was the hardest moment I had ever known. I was immediately surrounded by a score of men, including the captain, who had been my friend. He looked at me in amazement and plied me with many questions.

"As many questions demanded answer in my own thoughts, I dared not speak lest I incriminate a princess, one or the other. And though the captain was a friend, he had naught to do but act upon his duty, so he turned to those who held me and commanded, 'To the prison with him! There must he lie until such time as he shall answer for this deed!'

"It was not written that I should walk the way to the dungeon, for now the pain of my wounds overcame me, and save that two of the warriors held me up, I should have fallen to the ground. For the second time in the space of one day, my senses deserted me."

CHAPTER XXII

"THE force with which my body struck the hard prison floor awakened me, and I opened my eyes to a place of darkness that I knew could be none other than a dungeon-hole. As my eyes grew used to the faint light from its one small hole, set up high in the wall, I saw that this was a filthy place with its blackened walls and dirt upon the floor that seemed never to have been cleaned.

"Groping with both my hands before me, at last I found a stone bench and lifted myself thereon, where I sat holding my head in my hands to still the pain. My thoughts ran through my brain like the running of deer across the valley. I finally fell into sleep.

"When next I awakened, it was to find someone holding a lighted torch above me. Another, who looked like one of the *Ahdzacs*, doctors of the city, held open my mouth and poured into it something hot, which brought back in some measure the feeling of life to my body.

"When they had gone, they left me the light of two candles, for which I was thankful. I found that now I lay upon a soft matting, and that the wound in my head had been dressed. With the hot drink had come back much of the warmth to my blood. And since, in those days, I was young and filled with health, I recovered strength quickly, being soon able to rise and walk about the small space of the cell.

"Save for the opening of the door twice a day, to give me food and water, none came near me for many days.

"Yet life must still be going on outside, as before, I thought, and mused upon the battle that had been fought between our warriors and those of Ekchan. Was the king dead and was the Princess Ixkan now a queen? Surely, if she were queen, she would come to my rescue. What had been her thoughts when she learned of my capture—then the awful suddenness of the thought which filled my mind bade fair to madden me. Could Ixkan have done this fearful thing before she saw me. If so, why did she then ask me to do it? Or Ixlol? I fell to wondering if she had been with the king before she found me in the cave. But for what reason would Ixlol wish to murder her own father?

"Surely, she would not go to such length to save me from sacrifice for my warriors' desertion. Yet, she claimed to love me with even a greater love than did Ixkan—and had she not preferred her father's death to my own? And Ixlol's was the quicker temper, the firmness of purpose which was not Ixkan's. For that very reason, had Ixkan sought to have me do the deed. I could not longer dwell on such horror.

"But, even so, would I not gladly give my life to protect them both? Not for even a chance to defend myself, would I tell of the princesses' coming to the cave —if they did not themselves disclose it.

"I longed for Ixkan to come to me there to bring me some word of comfort and sympathy, until I became almost crazed with my thoughts. Why had Canich not come to me? Did he, too, believe me guilty and had he deserted me; or, with the king's death, had he lost his power?

"Once, when the door opened and the hand appeared holding my jug of water, I rose and went quickly to it, begging some word of the outside world from my

jailer. But all that answered me was his ugly face at the bars of the door. Weary and disheartened, I returned to my seat on the bench.

"Now more days added themselves to the weight within me, until the desire to end it all and depart this life became so strong that I sought about the dungeon hole for some weapon with which I might take my own life. I found nothing.

"Then out of my despair came another voice to tempt me, saying: 'This deed was not yours. Let the one whose hand struck the blow take the punishment. For a woman it would be but banishment to the *Kuna;* for you it will be the stone of sacrifice.'

" 'No! No!' I cried aloud and jumped to my feet, walking quickly up and down the narrow space of the cell, followed ever by the voice that hissed in my ears, 'The Stone of Sacrifice! The Stone of Sacrifice!'

"Louder and louder it grew—quicker and quicker went my feet on the floor of the cell, until it sounded like the shouting of many warriors, keeping time with the marching of their feet.

"The clanging of the cell door, as it was roughly opened, aroused me from these thoughts of torture. I turned and found my friend and blood-brother standing at my side holding a lighted candle of wax.

" 'Canich!' I cried, and seizing his hand held firm to it, with the strength of one who believes himself sinking in deep waters, and needs aid. My eyes fixed themselves on his face, though but faintly could I see it, for it seemed to me that surely a *tun* must have passed over us since last I had looked upon him.

" 'Brother!' he answered, and still holding to my hand, seated himself on the bench beside me. 'Never have you left my thoughts, and long ere this would I

have come to you, but the king forbade me until this day.'

" 'The king? He lives?' I cried.

"At that he bowed his head so that I might not see his face. 'Though sorely wounded, he will live,' he replied. 'Why did you do it, brother?'

"His words wrung my heart with anguish. Even he believed me guilty! And I could not blame him. 'Pray do not ask me that!' was all I said.

"He looked at me anxiously; then with a sudden change in his voice he asked, 'If you didn't do it, who did?'

"I could not reply.

" 'But, even so,' he said sadly, 'your punishment would be no less, since the desertion of your warriors will likewise call for your sacrifice. If there is aught I can do—' he offered.

"But I dared say nothing in my defense. I asked, 'And how did the king grant you permission to come this day and not before?' He turned aside his face and the hand that held mine gripped more firmly. 'Speak!' I bade him. 'Think not to increase my suffering, for naught could be worse than the days I have lived in this foul place!'

"Seeing I was set upon it, he told me: 'Yesterday did the king, the councilors and the priests sit in judgment on you—'

" 'But I was not present!' I broke in. 'Do they judge a man while his back is turned?'

" 'Your greater offense was against the king. For that reason they give you no voice in the matter. This is the custom of our land,' he told me in low tones.

" 'So be it,' I said, 'and doubtless it is better so, since

even had I come before them, my lips would have been closed and my tongue silent.'

"Now at these words, Canich turned to me and his voice grew loud as he spake:

" 'Nay, my brother! There is more to hear. I was present at the council, and though for long no words were asked of me, yet at the end, in return for my deeds in war, did I beg leave of the king to speak. After much talk among the councilors and himself, this he granted me. I begged that you might be brought before them to answer for yourself, which seemed to me only just.'

" 'You alone in my defense?' I asked, hope weak within me, though not entirely dead.

"For a long moment, Canich did not speak, nor did his eyes seek mine. So I waited until he should be moved to tell me what was in his mind.

" 'Nay; another sought speech in your behalf, but it was denied her—'

" 'Her!'

"Heeding not my interruption, Canich went on: 'Like a wildcat she fought the guards at the door until, afraid of harming her, they loosed their hold and she came into the presence of the king and council with the force of a dart suddenly loosed by the hand of a skilled thrower.'

"A sad expression, faintly seen in the dim candle light, covered the face of my friend. It was as though he saw again that scene in the council room and the maid fighting for entrance thereto.

" 'Coming before the king, she demanded the right to be heard, but this he sternly denied her and ordered her to leave. Ignoring his words, she addressed him as

though he had not spoken: "Hear me, O King and Councilors! The knife that was thrust in your—"

" 'Furiously, the king sprang to his feet. "Guard!" he thundered. "Remove the princess from the chamber!" but ere they could reach her side I became as one whose reason had left him. Even though it might mean imprisonment, yet did I spring to her side, brushing the guards away, and led her from the room.'

" 'Oah! The Princess Ixkan!' I cried to Canich. 'Already was it known to me that she would fight for me like a female jaguar fights for her cub.' Then from the mouth of Canich came these words of surprise and disappointment:

" 'It was not Ixkan, but her sister, Ixlol,' and low was his voice.

"A deep silence fell between us and time passed ere he went on: 'Tomorrow, at an early hour, you will be brought before the council, there to speak in your own behalf. Meantime, I shall do all that lies in my power to aid you, but much rests on the force of your own words.'

" 'Then am I already dead,' I told him, 'for I shall have naught to say in my defense.'

"Canich's own words of what had taken place in the council room, of Ixlol's attempt to plead my cause, had but strengthened my purpose to keep my tongue still and my lips closed against all that came to pass in the cave; more so since she had made this effort in my behalf.

" 'What mean you?' Canich asked me, and now the tones of his voice were filled with wonder. 'Know you not that your life hangs by a thread of no greater thickness than those made by a spider, unless you can satisfy

the council by strong words that you are not guilty of this deed?'

" 'O Canich, well do you know that my heart is filled with gratitude for your defense of me, but this is a thing of which I can speak to no man, nay, not even you who are my friend and brother.' Less to him, I thought to myself, since my silence may also protect the woman he loves. 'So let us speak no more of it, but now tell me, who has been so long a time shut off from the world outside, how went the battle between our warriors and those of Ekchan, and where is he?'

"For the time, he accepted my decision and told me of other things in these words: 'The battle brought victory to neither side, for the reason that those with you deserted us, thus strengthening the enemy. This I saw with my own eyes, though in vain I tried to reach your side with aid ere you fell and I could see you no more. When darkness came, the hands of the warriors were stayed. We camped on the scene of battle, and the warriors of the priests and Ekchan returned to the hills.

" 'Early in the same evening, the king held speech with his councilors, and it was decided to call Ekchan and the priests, to a meeting with them under the promise of safety. Both the king and those who advised with him were not willing that the fighting should continue; for, as they argued, when brother meets brother on the field of battle, the greatest harm is to the nation. So it was that a messenger was sent while the night was yet young, to the camp of the rebels, inviting them to a conference.

" 'The answer arrived quickly accepting this offer, and before the moon had ascended but half its journey

to the heavens above, came a body of men carrying flaming torches and wearing the white robes of the temples, toward our camp.

" 'At their head was Ahkin, the high priest, and in his hand he held the sign of peace—a green branch torn from a tree. But Ekchan was not with them. For a long time in the darkness of night did the king and Ahkin talk together. Naught do any but they know what passed between them, as their words at times became heated and then quieted down like the evening upon peaceful waters.

" 'Then afterward in the early morning light, the king called to the captains to assemble their warriors and he addressed them, saying that the rebellion was over and the war between brothers had ended. Then did the king seek rest for his weary bones in the cave beneath the ground, of which you know.

" 'Of the terms of peace I know little, except that both priests and nobles were satisfied and the common people are grumbling; but naught can they do when both the priests and nobles are against them.

" 'Ekchan still hides among the hills, and with him are great numbers of skillful warriors. He but waits for the day to descend upon the cities of *Luumilkay,* making them his own, and seizing the throne of the nation.

" 'With fair words and smiling faces do the priests address the king, so that his watchfulness sleeps in fancied security. Should he again offend them too greatly, he will see the hollowness of their words and the deceit of their fair manner. Then will they turn again to Ekchan, and for a second time will the blood of the nation run on the field of battle.'

"Here Canich ceased talking. As I looked upon him, I could see that this matter weighed heavily upon his mind, for his loyalty to the king and to the land of *Luumilkay* had ever been uppermost and unshaken in him.

" 'Would I were free, that we might go with all the loyal warriors at our command, to hunt down this black serpent, and end his days forever,' I cried.

"At these words, Canich turned quickly upon me, with the light of a new hope in his eyes. 'That might still be if, when on the morrow you come before the council, your words—'

"But I stopped him.

" 'Go before them I must if such be their command, but I shall speak no word in my defense, and on this none can change my decision!'

"With a deep sigh, he arose from the bench and started toward the door. My heart sank within me, to see him go in such a manner, for I knew that I had hurt him by having withheld my explanation from him. Yet I knew it could not be otherwise, and I bowed my head as he went, with little courage to look at him.

"After Canich left me, all again was still. I sat, still with bowed head upon my hands, my mind busy with many thoughts and none of them happy ones. It had been hard for me to deceive one who, since first my eyes rested upon his face, had held my heart in his hand; yet harder still to hold from myself the words of sympathy and courage I knew would be freely given, did he but know all that had taken place in the cave.

"Would he bid me speak and declare myself innocent of this crime, even though by so doing I might place guilt upon the head of Ixlol? The voice of jeal-

ousy spake to me, saying that his love for me was as great as that for the dark princess. But fairness spake louder still, asking what course I would take did this matter concern his protection in like manner, of Ixkan.

"Ixkan, who had given me her love—had she too tried, though in vain, to force a way to my side in this prison, even against the commands of the king?

"As though in answer to my thought, came a sound at the cell door. Quickly I was on my feet, only to sink straightway back again upon the bench, as I told myself it could only be my jailer with food and water.

"But no! . . . The door opened wide and within it stood two figures, wrapped in long cloaks. One carried a torch and I held back the breath in my throat as the other of them came toward me and, standing close, waited for me to speak.

"I breathed a name, 'Ixkan!' and would have drawn her to me; but now did the figure draw back, and the hood falling from her head revealed her to me—Ixlol.

"A moment she stood thus; then falling at my feet, broke into wild sobbing. When I came out of the spell which sight of her had cast upon me, I bent down and lifted her up on the stone bench, then stood looking down at her with set face and cold eyes.

" 'Why came you here to this filthy place?' I asked, my voice cold and stern.

"Before replying, Ixlol turned toward the door and bade the figure standing there—which now I saw was an *Ixchel* from the *Kuna,* leave the light and wait without. Not until we were alone did she speak; then looking first about the cell, which in the flickering light was even more forbidding in its filth and dinginess, she shook as though with cold, and turning back to me, cried:

" 'Ahmen! Ahmen! To this have you come in our country!'

" 'It is not more than I can bear, since it concerns more than my own honor and safety,' I said, watching her face for the effect my words might have. But her expression did not change. 'But this is no place for you; therefore, would I bid you leave me. It is better that I be alone with my thoughts.'

" 'Nay, you speak not with an open heart. There is one you would have beside you here—her whose name you spake when first I entered. Yet she has not come to you, as have I, in your hour of need.'

" 'Why should she come to me here?' I demanded of Ixlol. 'The love she has already bestowed upon me is not for such a place as this. Her love for me has brought me naught but happiness, while that you say is in your heart for me sends me but grief and trouble.'

"Ixlol shrank back upon the bench and seemed to cower against the wall. The stricken look upon her face that I could see by the glow of the torch, showed me that I had wounded her no less that if I had plunged a dagger into her heart and turned the blade within, to increase the pain. And I wondered. Had she then done this deed in my defense and now dared not speak, or had not the courage? In sudden pity, I blamed myself for not having read aright the heart of this maiden. No love was there in me for her, but gladly would I have recalled the words which wounded her so cruelly.

"She arose now from the bench and turned wearily to the door of the cell.

"I took a step toward her, intent on begging forgiveness for the sharpness of my speech; but putting

up a hand, she stopped me, moved toward the door, stepped without it and was gone.

"She left me to a sleepless night, in which I tossed and turned upon my hard couch. Thoughts of Ixlol and Ixkan, now one and then the other, passed through my mind and tortured me; doubt of the fair maid's love for me, mystery as to whence came the affection bestowed on me by her sister, Ixlol—to whom I had truly given no encouragement."

CHAPTER XXIII

"I WAS taken from the dungeon-hole at an early hour to be brought before the council. Even though I was carried there in a closed palanquin, the small light that entered it hurt my eyes, unused as they were to it after many days of darkness.

"I came before the king, who sat in the midst of the councilors. Silently I stood before him, awaiting his word.

" 'You stand before us, O man of the north, who but the space of a few suns past, took certain oaths and was honored as one of us, to answer a charge of attempted murder against your king. If you are not guilty of this, then must your words be strong and sure, else is your fate already sealed!'

" 'Speak, and quickly!' said the king impatiently, when I made no answer to his words.

" 'Nay,' I answered, 'for there is naught that I would say. My lips are closed and my tongue shall never move!'

"So saying, I closed my mouth, firm in my decision that I should open it no more before them.

" 'Then by your silence, you have declared yourself guilty of this crime, and the sentence of the council will now be given you!'

"As the king spake these words, his gaze went to the councilors and from them to the priests; seeing their approval the king smiled, then turned to the headman of the council, he bade him pronounce the sentence upon me.

"As the headman of the council rose to speak, there

was a movement of all present, as they leaned forward the better to hear his words. Before speaking, he drew himself up to his full height and assumed an air of great importance:

" 'Hear these words which I speak, O Ahmen, for they are words from the mouth of the king and of his Royal Council, the priests and nobles of the nation.

" 'You have been judged guilty, not only of being the commander of warriors who deserted upon the field of battle, but of the greater crime of having attempted the life of him to whom you swore undying loyalty. For this cause and for the solemn vows you broke, is your life demanded.

" 'And thus shall you die, O Ahmen, by the punishment of a disgraceful death!'

"Then did Canich beg attention from the king and seek for me a more honorable death, since he could do no more: 'O Mighty King of *Luumilkay,* whose word is ever law to Canich, your chieftain of ten thousand spears—well do I know how contemptible appears the crime committed against you; but knowing the former loyalty of Ahmen who was made my blood-brother by your favor, my heart yet holds that he could not have been so dishonorable. Something seals his lips which leaves him no power to open them. It is not the nature of man to so remain silent, neither confessing his guilt nor professing his innocence. Though naught will he say to save himself, yet I would plead for him a more honorable death. Did he not thrust himself with his brave warriors through the serried ranks of the Lacans, already flushed with anticipated victory, and kill their king, bringing victory to your throne?

" 'Did he not so conduct himself and improve our methods of warfare that he was raised to a commander

of equal rank even with me—your chief in command—and that did he well deserve? To me it seems that it would be most fitting, and generous of your Royal Majesty, should you honor him with the sacrifice to the god of war, that mayhap *Yum Batel* would favor us ever in the days to come, as he has so favored us with Ahmen in command of our warriors. Hear my words, O Gracious King!'

"After much discussion, it was so agreed upon; and well I understood the satisfaction of the High Priest, for, in this manner of death I should be placed upon the stone of sacrifice, while it would please him to revengefully cut out my still beating heart and offer it to the cruel god of war.

"But since this was the greatest honor which could be bestowed upon a warrior of Zacna, Canich had sought to honor me thus in death. Every man in the country would have contended for this very honor, could he have done so. Again, the headman of the council spake:

" 'Hear again these words which I speak, O Ahmen, for since you are one who has had great honor in this land, once being commander of ten thousand spears with one Canich, it is agreed that for your offences you shall be sacrificed to *Yum Batel*. In the space of three *uinals* will the ceremonies be conducted. From this time on until the day of sacrifice, even greater honors will be yours, as befits one who in this sacrifice becomes for a space of time, the earthly body of the god, himself.

" 'Now, according to the temple laws shall four wives be given you, to serve you and wait upon your slightest wish. Rich raiment, jewels and precious metal shall adorn your body. Your slightest wants shall be

supplied, nor shall your least wish be unfulfilled, save that you must dwell within the walls of your own garden and none may enter except at the command of the king.

" 'The honor of this position is awarded you, not because of the crimes of which you are judged guilty—for the usual punishment for them is a disgraceful death—but because you have served this land well in command of its warriors against its greatest enemies.

" 'These, O Ahmen, are the words of the king and of his Royal Council.'

"Although a sentence of sacrifice upon the altars of the gods was not more than I had expected, still, *batab,* I was held motionless for the time by the crushing effect of it when put into words.

"With an effort I shook this feeling from me. At least, until that day came I would live in all the ease that could be provided me.

"Much might happen during this time. Escape might be possible for I knew that there were still a few that I might number among my friends, who would aid me as much as they dared. Canich would find some means to visit me ere long, I knew, since his honor was as great as ever and his words bore force in the ears of the king.

"So did I come once more to my own house and there found all in readiness awaiting me, as for one who returns after traveling for many days far from his own land. As I looked about at all that was so well known to me, my eyes became as wet as those of my faithful servant, Ahpec, who greeted me joyfully.

" 'What did the *Ahkulel* of the council mean as to the four wives who would be given me?' I asked.

"At once did his manner change and eagerly he told

me: 'O Master, there will be chosen for you four of the fairest maidens in the land from among the highest born, to wait on him who is chosen for this sacrifice to the god of war. These maids will bend their wills to your slightest desire. They will strive one with another for your favor, since the highest honor a woman can have falls upon her who bears a child of such a union.'

" 'Stop!' I cried. 'Speak not of children, for no bride shall I take—I, who in the space of three *uinals* must die, but three moons more.'

" 'But you must, Master,' he replied. 'It is the law of the Temples. Four wives will be given you and they will come to this house to live as quickly as they are chosen. Already have I been commanded to make ready for them.'

" 'I will not have them!' I exclaimed furiously. 'Though they come, I shall have nothing to do with any of them.'

" 'That is for you to say,' Ahpec answered me, soothingly. 'You need only see them during the ceremonial parts of the day. They will obey you in all things, so do not fear that they will trouble you against your will.'

" 'It is well,' I growled. 'I have no desire for maids about me. I am a warrior and seek the company of men.'

" 'Yet they will be the choicest girls of the land, master, picked for their beauty, intelligence, and the sweetness of their natures. Even the daughter of the king is not of too exalted a rank to serve you, should she be chosen.'

"As Ahpec said these words, a great thought filled my heart. Perhaps Ixkan, the fair princess, might be

chosen. Still, there were many other maidens in the land. I ventured a question:

" 'Tell me, might a maid offer herself as a bride in such a case?'

" 'Even so, Master. The most royal maids are the first who are honored by having a choice.'

"Joy filled my breast as I heard this, for surely our love would bring her to me. Then would my days be filled with happiness and gladly would I kiss the stone of sacrifice to dwell in the rapture of our love for even those few short months.

"When, the next evening, there came to our ears the sound of footsteps of many bearers entering the courtway and the cries of the servants as they warned the people to make way, my heart became filled with anxiety. Surely, in one of those litters, hidden from the gaze of the curious, was Ixkan. Her would I take to my breast though the others be but pebbles in my path.

"The blood pounded in my throat and ears at the greatness of this thought. Surely, the love of Ixkan would bring her to me now. For she had freely sought to give me that love when good fortune favored me. Now would she prove her love for me by coming in this, my time of greatest need. She would soothe the hurt and anguish from my soul and with the healing power of her tenderness, banish all regret for the quickness of my going.

"I awoke from my dream of joy which was beyond the power of words to tell, and saw that Ahpec was still at my side.

" 'Stand not there,' I said angrily, 'as though you were carven of stone, else I shall be sorely tempted to try the thickness of your head upon yonder stone wall. Do you not know that the litters are in the courtway

which bear the maidens who will be my wives. Go now and receive them.'

"Ahpec's jaw dropped in amazement at my words, for he could not understand the sudden change in my manner. He left me quickly and shortly returned ere I had time to calm my excited thoughts.

" 'The brides of the sacrifice await you, my lord, in the reception hall. With them are the priests who will perform the ceremony of marriage.'

"Then suddenly, much would I have given could the earth have opened its mouth and swallowed me up. My hands began to tremble and my legs to shake as I thought of entering that room beyond, where waited—my brides. Yet would I have gone there at that moment, had not my servant stopped me and led me to my chamber.

" 'First, Master,' he said, clapping his hands as a signal to those without, 'must you be prepared in a more fitting manner to receive those who will, in but a short space of time, become your wives.'

"When all was ready, I was led to the reception hall where stood Ahkin, the High Priest, with two of lesser rank. The four maidens, who were attended by several *Ixchels* from the *Kuna,* stood with bowed heads at one side. They were clad in robes of wondrous beauty and about the head and face of each was wound a veil, its softness equaling that of the down on a young bird's breast and its fineness that of the spider's web—so thin that I knew I could be seen by them, though their faces were hidden from me.

"Now for the first time did I see that a gilded throne had been set up at the far end of the hall. To this I was led by Ahkin, and commanded to sit upon it. When I had so done, the ceremony of marriage began.

"First Ahkin spoke to the maidens, who dropped

upon their knees and bowed their heads to his words:

" 'Know you, O maidens, that this day is one of great honor in your lives, such as has never before fallen to your lot and never will again. There is no greater honor than to be chosen a bride for him who prepares himself to be the sacrifice to *Yum Batel,* and who, until that day shall come, is honored as the god, himself.

"When Ahkin had thus spoken, the four maidens arose and came close to where I sat upon the throne of gold, where they repeated in unison, the words of the vow that would bind them to me in marriage.

"As they spoke, my ears were keen for the sound of but one voice among them all, so that many of their words fell lightly upon my ears. Yet those that still remain with me are these: That each day they would greet me with happiness in their eyes even though their hearts be sad; that all their love I desired would be mine and I should be called the greatest of lovers; and at my feet they would sit at all times should that be my wish, but never would they be near save as I commanded them.

"These words and many more, they vowed to do and be; and if the keeping of such vows had ever come to pass in the outer world, I thought, then would this world be filled with wives of such perfection that the greater number of men would find a difficulty in dwelling with them. Yet this was the marriage vow in the land of *Luumilkay, batab,* and their purpose in taking it was no less firm than is that of the women of the north in this day.

"Then was I bidden by Ahkin to come down from the throne and unveil to my sight, each of the maidens in turn, that I might choose one for a favorite.

"Now my heart beat its quickest, and hope rose high within me. Though I had recognized none of the voices as they repeated the vows after the High Priest, I did not wonder greatly, for their tones were low and quivering. I stepped before the first one of the four, and with a hand that shook like a leaf in the path of the wind, slowly drew the veil aside.

"She was fair to look upon and the smile she bestowed upon me had in it the brightness of the world when the eye of day is overhead—but it was not Ixkan. Still hope dwelt within me. Taking my hand in hers, she dropped upon one knee and kissed it, ere I passed on to the bride next in line.

"Another veil I lifted, and still the face I longed to see was not revealed. Surely, it would be the next. Cold beads of sweat formed upon my forehead and my hands were hot and moist.

"The last bride stood before me, her head downcast, for she had stood behind the others as if in dread of the moment she awaited. Bands of metal seemed to grip my breast with the intensity of my emotion. Surely this was she who loved me. No longer was I conscious of Ahkin, of those with him or of the other brides. I tried to read the answer to my thought in the form of her body, but the cape hid it from me. Not even the shape of her head could I determine, for the veil and headdress covered it completely. Not a wisp of hair peeped without to give me a clew and thus to revive my flagging hope.

"Then as though from far away came the sound of a familiar voice, though my thoughts were so bewildered that I could neither recognize it nor even tell if it were from a human throat or but an inner spirit begging me have courage.

"My hand lifted, but by no conscious will of my own. It seemed to float of its own accord. The veil was pulled aside, the face was lifted toward me and my soul drank deep of the two blue eyes I saw before me.

"With a low glad cry, unmindful of those about us, I raised my arms and drew her toward me. Again that voice spoke to me, saying, 'Look upon the face of one who truly loves you!'

"Even as the words were spoken I eagerly obeyed, only too glad to gaze upon the face which I long had yearned to see. For the space of the snapping of a stick all went black before my eyes and when sight returned, the face of my beloved was as if far away. When it had receded until it was but the size of a grain of corn, it began again to grow larger. Still larger it grew until the eyes were as two great dishes filled with blue.

"Then they began to darken until they were the deepest brown—the face grew smaller again until it was as before this dizziness had seized me. My arms dropped to my side and I drew back as quickly as if I had been stung by the fangs of a viper—for the face was no longer that of Ixkan—but of her sister, Ixlol!

"The princess fell to her knees and as the others had done, carried my hand to her lips, then to her forehead. She remained thus until the movement of my hand caused her to rise.

"So we stood, face to face, neither of us having power to withdraw our gaze; while the words of Ahkin declared the ceremony at an end, and he, with the priests and priestesses, left me alone with my brides.

"Dully, I staggered to my chamber, followed by a bewildered servant, whose lack of courage alone forbade his questioning me as to the strange mood that had overpowered me."

CHAPTER XXIV

"THE first meal was one of many such, and each one of them brought me more torture than the one before. Truly had my servant spoken; the maids sought strongly for my favor, now one and then another plying me with food from their golden plates.

"All save one. At that first meal, Ixlol sat apart from the rest, eating in silence. Many times did my eyes meet hers, which seemed to hold in them a look of pity for my plight. This caused me more inward anger than I cared to show, since I desired not a feeling of this kind from her—I, who she well knew, loved her sister, Ixkan.

"In the days which followed, of Ixlol I saw little. She kept her room, studying much of the time a big book which I found was a book of laws for men and *kulels* who seek to know the rules of the land. At meal times, custom demanded that she be present; then was she also silent as though in deep thought. It may have been this very calm and quietness that first caused me to seek her company. The other maids were never still, wrongly thinking that my mood required the never-ending use of their tongues to please me.

"One night when she arose from her place at the table, I saw that Ixlol sought the quietness of the garden, and a desire strong within me sent me after her. A hunger was upon me for the company of one who could read my mood aright, a longing for soft words in my ear. Since these I could not hear from the lips of the maid I loved, and though I had no heart left to give another—yet I knew the words of Ixlol would be

tender with understanding since she had twice declared her love for me.

"I found her sitting beneath a tree whose blossom-laden branches almost hid her from my view, and dropped to the bench beside her.

" 'May I speak with you?' I asked deferentially, for I thought of the many times I had turned aside the companionship I now humbly sought.

" 'Your wish is my command, Ahmen.'

" 'But if I do not command, what would be your wish, Ixlol?'

" 'It has ever been to please you,' she said so gently that the words struck a blow at my heart and held me silent for very shame. Then, when I felt once more was I master of my voice, I asked her:

" 'Ixlol, what means this love you bear in your heart for me?'

" 'Where loves comes, or how, none can tell. But real love, Ahmen, is that which would give its all, even to life, for the loved one. Such has been the love I have borne you since first I looked upon your face, and cast my vote to save your life. I saved it—but for my own sister.'

" 'Since I asked not for love, truly was it sent to me from *Ixyacunah* herself,' Ixlol went on, 'though now she seems to desert me when I need her most.'

"I looked at her closely, seeking a meaning to her words. Without speaking, my eyes must have questioned her, for she said:

" 'Did you not tell me that my love had brought upon you trouble? Yet it longs to bring you only happiness.'

" 'Princess,' I quickly answered, 'gladly would I have called back those words before they reached your

ears, could I have done so; but since this could not be so, now do I humbly ask your forgiveness for them.'

" 'Forgiveness is not required, since your words did not kill my love. Nothing could do that. Because *Ixyacunah* herself has given me this love, then must it be for some purpose. If it is not for this life, then for that which comes after. Knowing this, I am content to wait.'

" 'You believe that?' I asked in surprise.

" 'Even so . . . but look!' and her eyes gazed beyond me. 'Your servant awaits speech with you.'

" 'Master, one awaits within who calls you friend and brother,' came Ahpec's words to my ears.

" 'Canich!' I cried, and as the servant left us, I turned to take leave of Ixlol.

"She had risen and was standing before me. 'Ahmen,' she said, 'would that I might close your ears to all sound ere you leave me. That which you will hear from him whom you name brother, will cause you more pain than death upon the stone of sacrifice. But since I cannot close them, you needs must hear—and still live!'

"When I would have questioned her, she smiled and denied me further words, reminding me that Canich awaited me within. So, filled with wonder, I left her, determined that not long should my friend keep me in doubt as to the full meaning of her words. We sat talking of many things late into the night, until the hour between two days had come.

"When first I met him, my mind was full of the warning Ixlol had given and I started to question him, asking what had happened in the world outside that I knew not of. He read the meaning of my thoughts, but believing to turn them into another road, spoke first of other matters. He told me that great was his sorrow since nothing he could do or say would change the pur-

pose of the king to send me to the stone of sacrifice. From his mother and Nicte he bore messages of love to me. He told me of the watchfulness of the priests over my house lest an attempt be made to rescue me and send me out of the city before the day of sacrifice should come.

"Of all these things did I let Canich speak since they were in his mind; but when he was at the end of them, I repeated to him the words of Ixlol in the garden, and waited for him to answer. Only when he found that delay would not longer serve him did he bring his lips to speak, and tell me all.

" 'Brother,' he began, as I forced the words from his mouth, 'this that I have to tell you will cause you sore heart. Would that the bonds of our friendship did not lay this duty on me, for rather would I keep my peace, leaving you to dream your unbroken dreams. But be it so.

" 'After the sentence of the king and his council was passed upon you, then did those in high authority begin the choosing of the four brides with whom you were to wed. This was done with great care and much thought, for know you Ahmen, this is considered a matter of much importance. The holy books of the temples charge the priests most strictly to this, so that he who in the end becomes a sacrifice to *Yum Batel,* shall lead a life of ease and great happiness during the three months before, while the god himself dwells within his body.

" 'For this reason certain of the priests came to the king and told him of your love for Ixkan. It is truly said, Ahmen, that they know all, but whether it is because the gods tell them, or because their servants spy out the innermost secrets of even the royal palace, I

do not know. But whether one or the other, they told him of your visits to the palace when all the world slept.

" 'Then did the king call the fair princess, Ixkan, to him and charge her with these things, saying that if such were true, then was it her duty to forswear the dignity of her station and the honor of her birth, and for the three months before the sacrifice become as the meanest of your wives. He told her that this was not only her duty to the love she bore you, but her duty to the gods as well, to become your handmaid and humbly wait upon your least desire, thinking naught of the menial service she must give you.

" 'Ixkan became as one struck dumb as the king told her of these things, for she had thought them locked in the breast of her maid, herself and you. So for the time, she knew not what to answer her father. At last she faltered:

" ' "Is it fitting that I, daughter of the king, should wed with one who, even though he be honored by the sacrifice to *Yum Batel,* still is but a cowardly criminal whose warriors deserted him upon the field of battle and who, in craven fear, attempted your life?"

" 'But he answered her sternly, "Even though you be the Princess Royal, still if this which my ears have heard be true, then is it your bounden duty to take your place at the side of him to whom your love is given. Let it never be whispered that a daughter of the Cocoms deserted a man of her own choosing, because misfortune has descended upon him."

" 'The princess looked upon the darkened face of the king and hesitated for long, turning over in her mind the many sacrifices of her ease and pleasure this duty would involve.

" 'The king became impatient and frowning darkly, thundered, "Speak!"

" 'Ixkan looked upon him with a light of fear in her eyes—fear which was mixed with cunningness. When she spoke her voice was soft and pleading. "Speak not so sternly to your first-born, Mighty Chieftain. Have ever I given you cause to speak in such a manner? Well might it be that this Ahmen has visited the palace during the hours that the sun hides its face. I do not say that he has not. But if he has, am I the only one within its walls to whose chamber he might come?"

" 'A look of astonishment passed over the king's face and it was followed by another of dawning understanding. "Ixlol," he breathed. "Ever has it been she whose actions have caused trouble. Did she not bring on the war with the Lacans, when her hand was given to their prince?"

" 'He gazed again upon Ixkan who stood before him, a strange look in her eyes as though she half regretted the words she had spoken, yet was glad. "So it is not you who loves Ahmen?"

" 'She hesitated, half opened her mouth to speak, and when the words would not come, she shook her head in denial.

" 'The king clapped his hands loudly. "Summon the Princess Ixlol!" he commanded the *holcan* who appeared at the signal.

" 'A light step was heard, the curtain at the end of the room parted and Ixlol slowly approached them, a light of curiosity in her eyes.

" ' "Ixlol," began the king sternly, "the priests have told me that he who is to be sacrificed to *Yum Batel,* the god of war, has frequently visited the palace at night. They have told me that he has been received in

the apartment of the princesses and that his heart is given to the one who calls him there at that time. Your sister has denied her love for him and you were summoned that I might, in the same manner, question you."

" 'Ixlol looked at her sister with astonishment written deep in her eyes. "Did you deny that?" she asked.

" ' "Yea!" the fair princess replied, "and well you know the reason!"

" 'Understanding and contempt of her sister's selfishness was on every line of Ixlol's face. Long did she gaze so; then did she turn to her father and lifting her head proudly, answered him. "Gladly do I confess my love for Ahmen."

" 'Even though Cocom had expected in a measure this answer, he was for a moment silent. "Did he visit your apartment at night?"

" ' "Even so," came the answer.

" 'Ixkan gazed upon this scene as though her ears could not be telling her that true words were spoken. "Ahmen visited you?" she almost shrieked.

" 'Ixlol looked at her calmly and I think with a little pity for the smallness of such a soul. "Yea," she answered, "he sent me a message of love and he visited me."

" 'Then did King Cocom command Ixlol, his daughter, to appear before the priests of the temples so that she might become a bride of the holy sacrifice to *Yum Batel.*'

"Canich's voice stopped as I listened in growing amazement. What my face looked like I do not know, but it felt like a mask of leather and as stiff as if it had dried in the sun. My mind was blank at the awfulness of the words I had heard. My soul was a dead thing and my heart beat in my breast so that it sounded in

my ears like the booming of war drums. I sat motionless, staring into space, suffering untold agonies.

"A hand was gently placed upon my shoulder; 'It is better that I leave you to yourself, brother,' he said quietly. 'Time and thought will heal the wound I have had to give you. Rest, that your body become stronger, and then think deeply, that you may see the unworthiness of the one in whose keeping you gave your heart. May the great god, *Hunabku,* give you rest and bring peace to your soul.'

"So saying, he quietly left me and asked that I be not disturbed, for none entered until late, when Ahpec brought me broths that I could not drink, and prepared me for my bed."

CHAPTER XXV

"SO, like one who has been sorely wounded in battle, I lay for two days upon my couch, going not from my chamber and seeing none but Ahpec, who guarded the door and sought at intervals to tempt me with rare foods, but there was no hunger in me.

"I, who until giving my heart into the keeping of Ixkan, had known nothing of women, could have better borne the blow of an axe or the stab of the sharpest knife, than this cruel hurt. But sorrow does not bear upon one forever, even though the wound itself may fester long. Then, too, I learned that out of evil comes good.

"When I began to think again, I knew that this cut, though sharp and painful—once over—was gone forever. The soul of her I loved must be a fearful thing, warped and misshapen. Had she come to me, yet would I have suffered all the days of my life, for well I knew, happiness could never have been mine with such as she.

"Then I realized that I was freed of every obligation that love might have imposed upon me. My thoughts turned more and more to other things. Foremost was Ixlol in my mind and the memory of her was a fresh herb upon my soul—healing, cleansing and comforting.

"For the first time since coming to the land I began to analyze my thoughts and actions, and an understanding grew upon me. Ixkan I began to see in her true light and found she was not unfamiliar to me as such. My love had been the love of love, the passion of earthly things. So clear was this to me that I grew

ashamed—ashamed that I, a man of stature and of years, should have followed so blindly without reason.

"I was free. Naught now could stop me from taking the pure love of Ixlol. I found that I had always craved it but knew it not. This was a different feeling from that I had experienced for her sister. It was a love of the spirit and of the soul, passionless, except as it beautified.

"Now did Ahpec bring me food and I ate and drank as one with hunger. Then for the first time did I command one of my wives to my presence. Seeking the quiet of the garden, I bade a servant tell Ixlol that I wished her to join me there, and in but the shortest space of time she came.

"Except in greeting, we sat in silence for a long while. It was the calmest and most restful moment of my life. I felt that here I could sit, unspeaking, until the walls of my garden crumbled to dust. Then Ixlol took one of my hands and placed it over her heart. I could feel it beating more rapidly than mine. Was it beating thus quickly for me, I wondered. Yet I knew it must be so, for did she not love me as she had said? This nearness of her, the touch of her hand on mine, gave me strength and at last unloosed my tongue.

"It was as if in that silence we had communed together—each understanding the thoughts of the other so that when I spoke it was but a continuation of the thoughts that had filled my mind.

" 'Tell me more of that love, which gives of itself freely, yet asks no return,' I begged her, 'for now do I see clearly that such a love was never mine, though I thought myself held in its bonds.'

"Doubtless the tones of my voice held bitterness, as

my words brought me thoughts of the fair maid, for Ixlol's reply sought gently to comfort me.

" 'Not to many is such love offered, which bestows all upon the loved one and looks for nothing in return save that which is freely given. Therefore, judge not too harshly, those from whom *Ixyacunah* has withheld this gift, Ahmen—but rather, pity them.'

"She spoke softly and when I turned to look at her, I saw that tears filled her eyes. Quickly did she bend her head to hide them from me and for her sake I turned away, though greatly did I desire to keep mine fixed upon her countenance, which never before had seemed so beautiful to me.

" 'I have been blind, Ixlol,' I told her sadly. 'In my awkward groping, I mistook the earthly desire of the flesh for the eternal love of the spirit. Stubbornly have I resisted the opening of my eyes and the learning of this truth, and now that misfortune and disaster have opened them—I see—but see too late.'

" 'Nay! It is not so!' came her voice to my ears, its tones sharp with quick denial.

"I turned to her, asking: 'What can there be of love left to one who, in the passing of a *uinal* will die on the stone of sacrifice?'

" 'That which dies is of the body and not the soul of man. True love lives on through many heavens, even beyond the ninth, for it reaches infinity—so say the Mayas.'

"Now did I feel within me the first hope that had been mine for long. Always had my thoughts dwelt on another world beyond this one, but the hope of finding therein a love that had been lost on this earth had seemed too great for my mind to hold.

" 'Then you believe that all is not ended when our spirits leave this flesh?' I asked her eagerly.

" 'How could that be? Think you that the great *Hunabku,* who made all, will let aught he made of soul be lost? Nay! These bodies in which we dwell for but a short time are of the earth, and they will go back from whence they came; but for our souls and those deep things within us, He has another purpose which can never be lost.'

"Oah! the peace and hope her words brought me was greater than can be told by the lips and tongue. For long hours, which seemed all too short, I sat at her feet, as a child at the feet of its mother, while Ixlol taught me the meaning of that which I had sought and failed to find.

"In many ways did she strive to spare me from the fate which each passing day brought nearer. Being a woman of many resources, even as capable as her sister was cunning, though with more generous and unselfish purpose, she planned for our escape from Zacna. Though she was a prisoner in my house even as I, she bribed the guards to command the presence of more important officials of the city, who came to her but refused to grant her requests. I later learned that, in her desperation, she even offered herself as a bribe to persuade them to lead us from the country in safety, but all these plans availed her naught.

"Only once after did hope for delay in my going enter my breast, but this did not remain with me for long. This was the day Ixlol spoke of the laws of the land and those of the temples, which she had been diligently searching. She told me that she had found words in the great books whereby the priests and councilors might be confounded by their very laws.

" 'If such words will delay my going, it is well,' I said, 'since they would bring joy in life to one I now love, as well as to me.'

"Ixlol said no more at that time nor did I question her further, for well I knew that she would do those things which were best for me.

"Now came the last day that I should see this world, for on the following morning I should be taken to the temple for the sacrifice. With loud lamentations did my wives bid me farewell, which was but a part of their play. They passed before me weeping, wailing—for naught, and then I sent them all from me save Ixlol.

"With her I talked long and at the end, spoke humble words of thanks for all she had bestowed upon me of hope and happiness in these last weeks. I begged of her to ask of me some favor in return, no matter how small it might be.

" 'One favor have I to ask,' she said, 'and it is this: grant that I be the last to bid you farewell.'

"This I promised would be so, though it were no favor, since such was the desire of my own heart.

"Canich came to me in the last hours when the watch upon me was doubly strong. The eye of day had started its upward journey into the heavens before he left me, and strong words of friendship and love that would never die had been spoken between us.

"Now that I was about to depart from this earth, I could tell him of my love for Ixlol. This I did, begging him to watch over her at all times. This was a needless request for I knew his love for the dark maid to be as deep as that of mine own. Yet he gave me his promise on it ere he took leave of me for the last time.

" 'Though you go before me to the ninth heaven,' he said, 'because of the love that is in the heart of each

of us for the other, I beg you to await me at the gates of *Tankul*. Then together we shall climb to the highest plane, where for all time we shall be brothers and walk side by side.' Then he was gone.

"Now came Ahpec to prepare me for the sacrifice and as best he could did he perform this duty, for his eyes were dimmed to all things with the tears he shed.

"First were all my fine clothes taken from me and I was clothed only in coarse aprons which hung back and front from a cord about my waist. Next came two priests from the temple to make the final examination of my body for blemishes, since he who goes to the stone as sacrifice to the gods, must be perfect in all parts of his body, save for the scars of honorable warfare.

"Suddenly Ixlol darted through the door and before I could stop her, addressed the priests:

" 'Is it not so, Learned Ones, that he who is offered for sacrifice to the god of war, must be in all things perfect?'

" 'It is even so, Princess,' answered the elder of the priests. They had but begun their examination and now they stopped and looked with wonder at this girl who questioned them concerning the teachings of the gods.

" 'Then look you, men of great wisdom! It is not written in the book of rules that this man shall be sacrificed to the war god, for his limb is scarred and torn by the claws of the mother jaguar which attacked Canich, his blood-brother. See!'

"With this last word she thrust aside the apron that I wore and exposed to the view of the priests the ragged scars which coursed my leg. At this they both drew close together and talked in low tones, while Ixlol glanced triumphantly at me.

"Finally the two priests seemed to have reached their decision and turning to the princess, the elder spake again:

" 'It will be needful, Princess, before this matter can be settled, to summon from the temple, the High Priest, Ahkin, so that he whose interpretation of the laws are as the words of the gods themselves, may settle this matter justly.'

"A runner was quickly dispatched and within a short space of time the palanquin of the High Priest was set in front of my door and he entered my house. Behind him were servants carrying the sacred books pertaining to the sacrifices.

"In silence the High Priest heard the words of Ixlol as repeated by the elder of the two whose duty it was to examine me. Then he turned to the princess and gave her a questioning look. At this she began a torrent of words as she earnestly sought to justify my release, quoting from the books and temple records.

"When she had finished, but still speaking no word, he motioned to the servants bearing the books and they approached him. For long he consulted them, reading from this one and from that, and then turning back to a place he had already read and poring over it again. I writhed in inward agony that such a simple thing should take so long to determine.

"At last he turned to Ixlol and spake, and as the words left his lips they were recorded upon the books by the *Uinictzibkul.*

" 'O Princess! Carefully have I considered the laws of the temples concerning the rites of sacrifice. They truly say that none may be honored by the kiss of the stone if he be not in all things perfect.

" 'But upon the body of Ahmen I find no imperfec-

tion except those which are the wounds of battle and the jaguar's claws.

" 'Know you that battle scars are, in the sight of the god of war, pleasing, for they testify to the bravery of him who is to be sacrificed. The jaguar wounds were made when Ahmen attacked, at the risk of his own life, that beast, and slew him, so that Canich, who became his blood-brother, might live.

" 'For this reason, they too, are marks of bravery, and as such are always acceptable to him who rules the destinies and victories of all men and nations in warfare.

" 'So say the temple laws!'

"With these words, followed by the servants carrying the books, he turned and left the room and went immediately to his palanquin. In another moment he was in it and his bearers carried him straightway back to the temple.

"I turned to Ixlol who was standing forlornly near the door, with great, unshed tears flooding her eyes. It was still my right, and I ordered all from the room. When they had gone, I took her tenderly in my arms and kissed the tears from her eyes.

" 'Grieve not, dear one,' I pleaded. 'It is better that I journey first to the Great Star, *Zacik,* there to await your coming.'

" 'They shall not take you now!' she declared with sudden passion, drawing away from me. 'There is still another way!'

" 'Nay, my Princess, do not try to hold me back and thereby offend the gods. Your words have taught me of the great love which knows no death. Possessing that love, though it tears my heart with more pain than that which I shall bear from the knife of sacrifice, to part

from you now, still my spirit will fly to the gates of *caaen* where I shall await you—forever, if need be.'

"I had again taken her in my arms where she rested as with a great peace, though our hearts raced and pounded and mingled with great turmoil as the rapids of the underground river by which I had entered *Lu-umilkay*.

" 'Let us say farewell, my Princess. I am young in years but my heart is weighted as with ages. *Hunabku*, the God of all, will protect me and give me peace until we meet again.'

"Her head lay against my breast; her eyes were closed as I spoke; but now she opened them and looked deep into mine and smiled a smile of serene confidence. Her sudden calmness baffled me. Was there some hidden meaning in the quiet depths of those sad eyes, I wondered. Then, as she spoke, I forgot all in the music of her voice. An intense longing for her possessed me, but the beauty of her gentle words calmed me and held me in their spell.

" 'Farewell, you whom I have loved since first my eyes met yours. I thank the goddess of love, *Ixyacunah*, who at last gave you to me, yet led me through such sorrow to your winning. Now kiss me . . . but once, Ahmen! I cannot bear more!' So our lips met, yet with naught of fire in their meeting. My only thought was one of pity for her. What hers was, I knew not; but her lips clung to mine without passion.

"One more long look into her lovely eyes so filled with tenderness—and then, fearing to stay longer lest my courage fail me, I turned and went quickly from the room.

"Outside, a palanquin of royal make awaited me. In this I was placed. With a strong guard about it and a

procession of priests and servants in front, we set out for the temple of sacrifice."

Here, Ahmen paused and gazed into the embers of the fire, as if revolving in his mind the amazing experiences of his youth, muttering words to himself which were unintelligible.

The wizard's conservative two-day limit for the telling of his story promised to be a good three before the tale would come to an end.

It was well on toward noon of the third day before the party breakfasted, for Cranton had ordered Lupe to permit Ahmen to sleep as long as he wished. And much he needed the rest, as the morning light revealed what Cranton had hoped, the night before, was a trick of the wavering match-light. The wizard's eyes were sunken in their bony sockets, and his cheeks were even more hollowed than usual; his eyes burned with a feverish light that bespoke the exhaustion which the strain of his story-telling had provoked.

As the hours had passed with the recital of the tale and his voice vibrated strongly with the emotions of dramatic incidents or resumed a monotone of calm narration, in spite of an absorbed interest which permitted him to lose not a word, his listener became aware of vague doubts and questions in his own subconscious mind, clamoring for attention. Why had this old Indian, though spent with the hardships of a long and arduous journey, persisted in telling him the story of his long-ago youth—for his benefit, he had said? It had been plain to Cranton, in the early part of the story, that as Ahmen regarded Lolita as the reincarnation of his beloved Ixlol, so did he intimate that Dolores bore a similar resemblance to Ixkan. Could such a coincidence be possible? He had never seriously con-

sidered the theory, gave no credence to it now, but the idea seemed plausible enough. No doubt, we could all trace a resemblance in ourselves to some ancient ancestor, if we wished.

Still the idea persisted in his mind, and when, as the story developed, the incidents and traits of character pertaining to Ixkan so vividly paralleled those of Dolores, he was troubled. Had she too, been false in her declaration of love for him? Then the thought smote him—had she professed to love him? True, she had encouraged his love for her, even as had Ixkan encouraged Ahmen. She had vehemently denied her love for Sanchez; but would she also betray her American lover in a crisis, should one arise? He could not believe it!

Yet, he would have sacrificed much to know how Cocom's investigations had resulted. Had he been an absent actor in the drama, even as Ahmen had been exiled from an active part in the drama at the palace when Ixkan had denied Ahmen's love? Surely, since Sanchez' conspiracy had been the result of his hatred for his American rival, he would become involved in the solution of the mystery—and Dolores would be given an opportunity to profess her loyalty to him. Had this been the implication of her last words to him?

"You doubt Dolores," taunted a voice within, "but in a similar situation, would you doubt Lolita? Would not her loyalty, in friendship or love, be unquestionable?" Of course, agreed Cranton; but then, the two girls were of so different natures. Which was exactly what troubled him.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN Merida, events were taking a dramatic turn which rivaled that of the wizard's story as he told it to Cranton; and though time had separated the enaction of the two dramas by some three score years or more, the actors and actresses of each were of striking resemblance and character. Time moves with rapid pace while nations struggle to progress, yet each generation produces its identical farces and dramas, comedies and tragedies; each circle completes its circumference though different tangents may strike off at varied angles.

When Pedro Cocom had somewhat recovered from his injuries, he began some quiet investigations. He had refused to see all friends who called to inquire for his welfare, wishing to avoid an encounter with Sanchez until he had fully decided upon his plan of action. He accordingly sent for the offender one day, and was surprised at his prompt appearance and air of nonchalance. He greeted the older man fondly and anxiously inquired if he were quite recovered.

Cocom watched him keenly as he replied, "Yes, I seem to be all right, but what might have happened, I shudder to think."

"Yes, *Señor,* you were lucky to escape more serious injury."

"And does he regret that I did?" he wondered, but continued aloud, "And *Señor* Cranton was even more fortunate, for which I am glad, as he was in my car."

A scowl darkened the young man's face. "His safety was of less importance than yours, *Señor,*" gruffly.

"Ah" thought Pedro, "just as I suspected. His intention was to injure Cranton." Then he turned suddenly and looked Sanchez squarely in the eye. "By the way, I did not see you after the ball that night. Did you leave early?"

Sanchez dropped his eyes and smiled a trifle shamefacedly, "No, *Señor,* it was very late when I left. I spoke to no one and slipped away, for I was hardly in a condition to see anyone. Your wines tempted me beyond my resistance. Your pardon, *Señor.* And also for the use of the divan in your library. Your gardener assisted me to my car and there will be no scandal if he will keep quiet. The wonder is that I arrived home alive," with an embarrassed laugh.

Cocom was aghast at his indifferent manner. Well, of course, he would assume such an attitude to avoid suspicion. Yet, how could he think that he had not been recognized? He had made no effort to conceal his identity.

"It's a wonder any of us are alive," he commented grimly, nonplussed at Sanchez's attitude. But he was now more determined than before, to sift the affair to the bottom.

Upon Sanchez' departure, he summoned the gardener.

"José, on the night of the grand ball, did anyone leave the house after I had departed with the *Señor* Cranton?"

"Si, Señor," noncommittally.

"Do you know who it was?"

"Si, Señor. It was the *Señor* Sanchez."

"Did you assist him to his car?"

"Si, and sorry was I to see him drive away alone."

"About how late was it?"

"It was about the hour when the cocks crow."

"What's that?" Cocom fairly shouted, rising to his feet. "Do you mean to say that it was in the morning?"

"Si Señor," José answered with alarm, fearing that he had made some error.

"And where was he all this time?"

"In your library, *Señor,* sleeping."

"Very well, José, go about your work; and I would ask you to repeat nothing about this affair."

"Si, Señor."

"By all the gods, how could that be?" exclaimed Pedro to himself. "Could it be possible that it wasn't Sanchez, after all!" He sat for awhile, thinking intently—his face troubled. But who else could it have been? He could never mistake that car and Manuel's driving apparel, two of the conspicuous features of Merida. What to do now? He was more bewildered than ever. He decided to talk with Perez, who could probably tell him nothing—but it was natural to turn to him.

Perez appeared, somewhat surprised. He wondered why Pedro had summoned him so ceremoniously.

"It is good to see you about again, *Señor,"* he offered in greeting.

"Yes, I was really fortunate to escape so well."

"How did the accident happen? Lolita tells me you were driving the young American to the hotel."

"Yes, and fortunately, his injuries were even slighter than mine."

"I don't suppose Manuel agrees with you," he shrugged.

"What do you mean?" quickly.

"Only that he was very angry at the *Señor* Cranton's attentions to Dolores. He had even threatened revenge

upon him, so he would no doubt have rejoiced at his injury, or even death."

"Do you know anything more about it?"

Perez shifted his position and his gaze. "About what, *Señor?*"

"Did Sanchez attempt to carry out his threats? Did you see him after the ball? Did he leave early?"

"He did, *Señor*. I saw him leave early, but for what reason I don't know. He may have had plans for all I know, but *Señor* Cranton started to the hotel in your car, didn't he?"

Cocom nodded thoughtfully, and remained silent for some time. Finally—"Why did you impersonate Sanchez and drive his car into mine?" his abrupt question exploded like a bomb.

Perez started, and colored guiltily. "Why—what do you mean—*Señor—?*"

"I think you know. Why pretend longer? I had no idea of suspecting you until you told me that you saw Sanchez leave early. I had learned and proved, before, that he did not leave the house until early in the morning. Why did you do it? What could possibly have been your motive?"

Perez was cornered, but he replied defiantly, "*Señor* Cocom, there are many things that you don't understand; but if you propose to make me the goat, as the Americans say, I'll stand for it. But I have nothing more to say."

"Very well, young man. I'll have something to say, later. You may go."

Cocom, feeling very much like one of his ancient ancestors holding court, next sent for Dolores.

"Did you wish to see me, Papa?" she came immediately.

"Yes, daughter. Please be seated." For several moments he regarded her closely. Finally, he asked, "Do you love Manuel?"

After a moment, she lifted her head defiantly, "No, Papa. You must know that I do not. Only your word pledges me to marriage with him. But I shan't marry him! I can't!" and she covered her face with her hands.

"Is there—someone else?" he ventured.

Without looking up, she shook her head negatively.

For awhile the room was very still. "Dolores, word has come to me that you met the *Señor* Cranton in the shadows of the church on the night before his departure. Is this true? I shall not believe the report unless you tell me it is so."

She looked up quickly, startled, then met his eyes. "Have I ever given you cause to believe such disobedience from me, Papa? Perhaps the *Señor* Cranton's rendezvous was with some other girl of Merida. Anyway, he has always played more with Lolita than with me. But she is a woman now as well as I!"

"Perhaps the report was but the gossip of wagging tongues," he dismissed the subject—and Dolores.

Not satisfied, he sent for Lolita, who came with solicitous inquiry, "Yes, *Papacito,* what may I do for you?"

"You may answer some questions for me; only be sure that you reply to them with careful consideration." He hesitated. "Do you love Ernesto?"

"Why—*Papacito!* Why do you ask that?"

"Because I wish to know. Your marriage day approaches, and I would insure your happiness."

"But already your word is pledged by the old custom," uncertainly.

"Quite so. But no daughter of mine is going to be pledged against her will, custom or no custom."

Relief and joy shone in her expressive young face. She ran to him and threw her arms about him. "You're the dearest *papacito!* I never dreamed of the possibility of not marrying Ernesto! No, *Papacito,* I like him well—but I do not love him. I have tried because I wished to make you happy. But love does not come when bidden," softly.

He watched her fondly. "And what do you know of love, little one?"

"That it is a precious thing which comes unbidden and often most unexpectedly, and will not be commanded."

"Very well, you need not marry Ernesto Perez. He has offended me greatly and I would not trust your happiness to his keeping. It is well that you do not love him. Is there—someone else?"

"Yes, *Papacito,*" she admitted shyly; and Cocom did not question her further, inasmuch as she did not voluntarily offer further explanation. So happy was her expression that he marveled how, not loving Ernesto and wishing to be freed, she had appeared so willing to comply with his wishes. Evidently he had made a bad business of betrothing his daughters.

Suddenly, he rose to his feet and pounded the table so fiercely that the decanter almost toppled over, exclaiming, "I have it! It's as clear as a summer sky. Perez loves Dolores and was trying to kill two birds with one stone. He wanted to injure Cranton because he suspected him to be in love with Dolores and at the same time, give me such a shock as would discredit Sanchez so that I would kick him from my house. I can't believe that it was his intention to severely injure

me. But I shall have to teach him to be more discreet in his methods," he concluded, in the reasonable manner which was characteristic of him.

Taking advantage of Pedro's absence that evening, Perez called to see Lolita. He went into the *patio,* where she presently joined him, and approached him uncertainly.

"Has your father spoken to you about our little difference?" he asked, when they had exchanged a few inconsequential words.

"Yes, Ernesto, I am sorry that you have displeased him. He has told me that I cannot marry you. For that, I am made happy. I like you, but I do not love you, Ernesto. It is no fault of yours. I am sorry."

"I am glad, Lolita. For I do not wish to hurt you. Neither do I love you. It is well. But I do love your sister, desperately. That is how I incurred your father's disapproval—trying to discredit Manuel, that I might have a chance to win her. But I have gained nothing!" despondently.

She was at once sympathetic. "I am sorry. Does Dolores—?"

"I am quite sure she loves me, but she has had no right to tell me. It matters not. I love her. Oh, Lolita, will you not help me? Will you send her to me here, now? For I may never again have an opportunity to see her?"

She was influenced by her sympathy for this man who loved so desperately, and for her sister, should she also have loved him hopelessly.

So it was that Dolores found him in the garden, eagerly advancing toward her with outstretched arms. She avoided his caress, questioned him.

"Dolores! don't you see? I've done everything I

could think of—wild things they were—to make it possible to win you. I've loved you madly, hopelessly, for years; and knowing besides that you despised Manuel, I've suffered everything. Now your father is furious at me and I have not only succeeded in breaking my engagement to Lolita, but have lost all hope of persuading him to consider my marriage to you. But you love me—tell me, Dolores!"

"I don't understand you at all," evasively. "It is true that I do not love Manuel, but—"

"But what? There is no other!"

"Have you forgotten how, but a few days ago, you were protecting another from Manuel's insults?" she reminded him with an oblique glance.

His arms dropped limply to his sides—then raised again imploringly. "But you don't love him! You can't! He only fascinates you because he is an American. Always, you have been attracted to the American ways and people. Because you have lived among them and like them. I shall take you there. That is the very thing! Marry and we shall run away to the States. We shall be very happy. I, too, like that country and its ways. To elope is American. Your father will not consent to our marriage, so we shall elope—to America!"

He could see that he was making an impression, and continued, "If you stay, you must marry Manuel, whom you hate. Think of that, Dolores! Either you must marry Manuel whom you despise, or come with me, who loves you and will make you happy. You will come?"

CHAPTER XXVII

REFRESHED with sleep, a hearty morning meal and several cigarettes apiece, the party at Multun had scarcely seated themselves, when Lupe slipped unobtrusively into his place at his master's side, and Ahmen began:

"Little does my mind hold of that short journey to the temple, since my thoughts were filled with the memory of my parting with Ixlol, save that a great number of the people gathered about the palanquin and followed us, talking in loud and angry tones. Thus did I know that they had not relented toward me and would be satisfied only when my heart had been torn from my breast and my body thrown to them for destruction.

"At the foot of the steps which led to the temple, my palanquin was set down and, surrounded by priests and temple servants. I walked up the steps of the platform on which stood the black rounded stone of sacrifice, opposite the great pyramid of *Kukulcan*. My eyes saw that a great number of people awaited my coming —so many were there it seemed that all the land of *Luumilkay* had come to witness my end. I was led by two priests into a small temple which stood at the side of the platform—there to be prepared for the stone.

"First was my body anointed with sweet smelling oil, and when this had dried into my skin, one of the temple servants came near and at the command of Ahkin—who, the while, looked upon me with a smile of triumph now that I was in his power—painted my body with a color of light blue. This he did all over

save for a circled spot of red straight over my heart, which was painted by another.

"Well did I know the meaning of that spot, and at the thought a sudden pain shot through me, as though I had been already struck with the knife which would lay bare my heart. But a soft voice, strangely like unto that of Ixlol, whispered courage into my ears and I gained peace once more.

"When the painting of my body was finished, I was charged by Ahkin to pray to the god of war, whose image was set up at one end of the room, to accept my sacrifice with his favor to *Luumilkay*.

"This had I no heart for. Did not my own God, mine and Ixlol's, already know the thoughts of my heart? This was enough. But, left alone for the space of a moment, I gazed around me and for the first time, a shudder of horror went over me. All about the place were signs of those already sacrificed, and the air was filled with the smell of blood that had not long been shed. This might well have cost me my courage, had not Ahkin and two of the priests returned at that moment to lead me forth. I was not alone for the sacrifice. One other was there—a young man whose courage was as small as his years. He filled our ears with his groaning and crying even before he came to be laid upon the stone.

"While Ahkin and the priests went through the ceremonies which came first, my eyes took in all about me. At the foot of the steps were gathered the people of the city. Like a great crowd of hungry jaguars, they looked toward the platform, their eyes filled with the desire for the sight of blood. The hands of those I could see, already impatient to receive the dead bodies

of the stone's victims, were curved like the claws of animals.

"This sight left me unmoved. What they did to my body would be unknown to me. Ere that time should come, my soul would already have reached the great white star, *Zacik,* awaiting the beginning of my journey to the ninth heaven.

"It was not until I had turned from the gaze of the people, to face those who sat upon a higher platform there at the back of the stone, that the need came for me to master the thoughts that rose in my mind. There sat the king, his councilors and nobles about him, and on his right, the Princess Royal. The seat on the left of the king was empty. I found that my eyes could rest upon the fair maid and my heart remain unmoved. There was no wonder in my mind that she who had deliberately killed that which once I had thought to be true love, could now come to gaze upon the destruction of that which alone had satisfied her—my body.

"For the space of a moment I fixed my eyes upon her face and as best I could, I made them speak the thoughts of my mind which gladly would I have cried aloud to her, so that all about us might hear:

" 'O faithless one, who knew not the meaning of love, soon will you see this body which was yours for a brief time, robbed of its fleshly heart and thrown to the waiting dogs, yonder. But that which keeps the light of hope in my eyes, you will never see. The spirit and soul of me, given by the great god, *Hunabku,* and soon to speed to that other world, will never be yours. There will I await the coming of one whose love for me, and mine for her, is stronger than all else—your sister, Ixlol!'

"As though she read the message of my eyes, Ixkan

dropped her own from my gaze; and thus may she have continued to sit through it all, since I looked no more upon her.

"The first ceremonies being over, the young man was led forward to a stone of sacrifice at the end of the platform. His body was left unpainted, as his sacrifice was for a common crime which carried none of the honors mine commanded—doubtless that of theft.

"Now came a very aged temple servant bearing a jar of red paint and a feather brush and quickly marked the place where his heart beat, to guide more surely the stroke of the knife. This old servant had served thus for many years.

"Now my eyes became fixed upon the stone and though at times I should gladly have done so, I could not move them from it. They were held by a power greater than my will and I was forced to look upon the horrible act of what, ere long, would be my own fate.

"The death of that young man was a pitiful sight. He fought so fiercely to be free that great strength of the *holcans* was needed to hold him down on the stone. After a long struggle, hope died within him and he lay still, groaning and crying. Never shall I forget the cry that left his lips as the knife descended and cleft into his breast.

"With it, Ahkin tore a great hole in the victim and, plunging his hand into the opening, drew out the still beating heart and threw its bloody mass upon a gold plate which was held by another priest.

"Oah, *batab,* I see you shudder as I tell you of this gruesome ceremony. But you, as well as I, have seen the pictures of this horrible death painted upon the

south wall of the Tiger Temple at Chichen Itza, by the ancients.*

"Now, those who had been holding the body lifted it from the stone and threw it quickly down the steps to the waiting crowd, which fell upon it and tore it to shreds.

"The priest who held the golden plate on which rested the heart, carried it with much ceremony to the inner shrine where stood the image of *Ahpuch,* the god of death. Taking up a golden spoon, he lifted the heart and fed it into the grimacing maw of the idol.

"Which was to be my fate in but a short time, except that my heart would be given to the image of *Yum Batel,* the god of war. My eyes closed to the light of day with the horror of it. I fought to keep my brain calm and free from the panic of terrible fear that swept over me.

"Now, my turn had come. I felt myself seized and before I realized it, I was upon the stone at the center of the platform. The *holcans* stretched my body so tightly over it that I thought to feel it break in two.

"Much would I have given now to feel the knife's point without further waiting, for the pain of being held thus was as intense as the agony of my mind. I closed my eyes again and heard as from a distance the voice of Ahkin as he spoke in a slow, even voice the words of the ceremony.

"Then came a silence upon the platform, through which arose the voices of the people as their excitement grew. Was I not chief among the victims this day, the sacrifice to the great *Yum Batel?* They thirsted for my

*This form of sacrifice as performed by the ancient Itza priests appears as stated by Ahmen, within the Temple of the Tigers at Chichen Itza, the City of the Sacred Well, on the south wall near the top, painted in color on a hard stucco surface.—EDITOR.

blood as does one who has not drunk of water for many days. Their feet were already upon the steps waiting to receive my body into their grasping hands, to tear it apart and eat it hungrily that their bodies might be filled with bravery and that they might be favored by the god of war.

"In the eye of my mind I saw all this, while I longed for the stab of the knife which would end it all. I opened my eyes to see what withheld it. Over me bent the face of Ahkin, his eyes filled with a wild light of joy. This moment had he awaited since I had arrived in this land of *Luumilkay* and first appeared before the king. Ever had he hated me. At that time I had escaped by the vote of the Princess Ixlol, but at last I was in his power. Though he desired to end the life in my body, still would he delay that end as long as he might that the manner of my death be made more horrible. Well did he know the pain that must be mine as I lay stretched upon the stone.

"I read this wicked purpose in his face as he bent over me, and as best I could, I answered his look with one of scorn. He smiled, and I read his meaning. He longed to hear me cry aloud in my pain and to see the panic of death seize me. My lips came together firmly. I would rob him of that pleasure, for not a sound would break through them. Doubtless my eyes told of my determination, for now anger clouded his face, and, intent upon finishing me, he raised the knife on high.

"I closed my eyes to shut out the sight and strove to bring before my mind's eye, the face of Ixlol. This I longed to see last of all ere the knife pierced my breast and freed my waiting soul.

"From below arose the voices of the crowd, impatient for their prey. Still, I felt not the thrust of the

knife. What held it back? The pain in my body increased as the *holcans* held me ever tightly over the stone; the muscles of my legs and arms began to cramp. I prayed to the god of all, 'O *Hunabku,* speed my going.' And still I did not feel the knife. The sound of voices was now louder and more impatient.

"What was happening in the world outside the vision of my closed eyes? I had but to open them to know; and yet fear held them closed. lest I should see the downward thrust of the knife. . . .

"Then, someone groaned and there was a sound—like the air being blown through water. The tremendous force with which I was being held against the stone was released and I seemed to be floating through space. My mind was bewildered. Had the blow already fallen and had my spirit been released with such speed that I had not been aware of the shock and pain of the knife cutting its way through bone and flesh to that cavity where lay my heart?

"Then a familiar voice called, 'Ahmen!'—but, though familiar, it was filled with strange tones. It was soft and gentle, but resolute, and in it I heard also exultation.

"Before I could summon courage to open my eyes, there came to me a scurrying sound as the feet of a hundred frightened animals running. Then a long sigh and gasp as from ten times a thousand throats.

"I sat upright with a bound, amazed that my movements were free and unhampered. No longer was I held. I, who had never again expected to see the light of day, opened my eyes to the glorious sun, and beheld a sight which held me motionless.

"It was as though I had slept, *batab,* and then awakened in a new and strange world. Ixlol, holding a

dagger which glistened red in the sunlight, stood before me; the king, the fair princess, the guards, councilors and priests, stood or sat in various attitudes of horrified amazement. Some cried out; some were stunned to silence; some rushed forward, then stopped. On the stone steps, head downward, a horrible gash in his throat, lay the body of the High Priest. The *holcans* panic-stricken were fleeing; and the mob of people below jostled each other like animals, aghast at the sacrilege.

"Ixlol, realizing I now sensed it all, smiled at me a pitiful smile and slowly, as with great weariness, she turned and faced the king. As she spoke, a profound stillness came over the whole scene and not one moved in that great assembly.

" 'King of the nine cities of *Luumilkay!* Chief of the tribe of Itzas and whom I once called father; well do I know that my life is forfeit to my deed. Even a princess of the House of Cocom may not slay a High Priest of the Sun, and for that sacrilege, retain her life. But death is sweet to me, for by it I purchase the life of him who is more dear to me than any earthly joy.

" 'Hear me, O King and Councilors! Hear me, priests and magicians! Hear me, all living things! Now all may say that it was I who sought to kill the king as he slept, and for the one I love I die in his stead.'

"Canich stood forth to protect her and I sprang forward; but these legs, *paal batab,* which never before or since have failed me, were cramped from the clutch of the *nacons* and bent under me so that I fell to the ground and could not rise. And at that moment Ixlol raised the knife which still gleamed with the blood

of the High Priest, and plunged it into her breast. Canich caught her body as it fell.

"A great silence reigned over the scene. Even the blazing sun above seemed to hang motionless in the sky. The wind gods held their breath and not a breeze stirred. The birds—the whole world seemed paralyzed by the drama that was being enacted there.

"Though every drop of blood seemed to be drained from my heart and my brain was a dead, dry thing that burned within my head, the picture remains with me today as strong as it was that day: Ixlol, limp and lifeless, hanging over Canich's arm, her life-blood flowing over him as he stood there too horrified to move, with agony painted on every line of his face; the king motionless, his eyes staring as though he could not believe the sight they saw."

The old story teller's voice stopped suddenly. His sunken eyes filled with tears which he brushed aside with his *zaztun* cloth, and Cranton could scarcely restrain his own emotions as the broken quavering voice resumed the tragic tale:

"Then Canich turned. Holding the body before him in his two arms as though it were an offering more precious than gold, he descended the steps and made his way through the throngs below, which silently opened up a path for him, and ascended the steps leading to the temple of *Hunabku.* Know you, my young *batab,* that the priests of *Hunabku,* the god of all gods, though they bowed in submission to the will of the High Priest of the Sun as all who served in the temples of *Luumilkay,* still kept the purity of their worship untainted by the bloody and horrible sacrifices which the religion of their fathers knew not. Here in the purity of a temple undefiled by lust and cruelty, her body would

be received and her soul speeded to that ninth heaven by prayers of kindly priests and by offerings of incense, fruits and flowers.

"Reaching the temple doorway, Canich disappeared within, bearing his tragic burden. Then a sigh, made by the exhalation of thousands of lungs, arose from the multitude and ascended to the heavens like a wail of mourning for her departed soul. It was as though everyone had suddenly awakened from a horrible dream and each one moved hesitatingly, futilely, as though the god of reason had for a time robbed them of the power to act. Clutching at the side of the stone of sacrifice, I pulled myself erect and staggered a few steps. Now I could feel the blood coursing warm again through my veins.

"Before I had reached the stairway to follow Canich who held in his arms that which was more dear to me than hope of heaven, the king stopped me:

" 'Stay, Ahmen,' he commanded.

"I turned to face him and wearily saluted, not knowing what thoughts he held in his mind. To me it made little difference—freedom, the dungeon or death—of the three I preferred death, had expected it, anticipated it as a release from the sorrows, perplexities and strife of this life.

"His face was impassive, with only the slightest expression of wonderment left upon it. After gazing at me long, he spake:

" 'It would seem, O warrior who came from the lands of the north, that you have friends who love you dearly within the gates of *Luumilkay*. Twice did she, who was my daughter, save your life, even though by so doing, she, in the end, lost her own. There is another, too, who calls you blood-brother, who has op-

posed even me, the King, in your behalf. To his protection I now commend you, and him will I hold accountable for your future.'

"I bowed in submission to his will and blindly made my way to the altar of *Hunabku,* where lay Ixlol. As I entered the sanctuary, Canich rose from where he had been kneeling beside the body, and grasped my arm. Tears streamed down his face without shame as he silently pointed to the form which lay before us among the flowers that decorated the altar of the great and only god.

"How long we mourned, each in his own way, I know not, but the sun had set and the moon was high in the sky when the chief priest of the temple touched us gently on our shoulders and led us to the place of worship without the sanctuary. Four *holcans* were standing before the shrines of the *bacabs,* of the four corners of the earth, burning offerings of incense and intoning prayers for the soul of her who lay within the inner shrine.

" 'It is not well, my sons, that you should mourn in this way,' the old priest told us gently. 'She who has left this world is now in the Great Star, ready to begin her journey through the portals of the nine *caaens.* Even you, who loved her, would not selfishly bring her back to this mortal plane to suffer the ills and pains which, now in paradise, she will never know.'

"Thus with soothing words did he blunt the point of the knife which had severed two souls for a space of time; and soon we felt more comforted and left, knowing that prayers and sacrifices would be made to speed our loved one on her journey.

"When we arrived at the house of Canich, I entered

with him and we sat long in his chamber, silent except for a word now and then. Each was deep in his own thoughts and memories and drawn close to the other by the grief and love which was common to us both. When the morning's sun began to lighten the sky, Canich arose and pinched out the wax lamp which had burned all night. Then he walked over to me and placed his hand upon my shoulder.

" 'Brother,' he began gravely, 'both you and I have lost that which we loved most dearly, yet by that loss are we drawn more closely together. For long have I loved Ixlol, but the goddess *Ixyacunah* willed that her love belonged to you.'

"He drew from the cape he still wore, a fine gold chain, at the end of which dangled the royal gold medallion of a princess with the signet of the daughter of the house of Cocom graven on it. My heart jumped at the sight, for it was almost severed in twain, by the thrust of the dagger, I well knew. On its shining surface were dark red stains and even as he fingered it, the small piece nearly fell apart from the rest. Canich stared at it long.

" 'Before you followed me to the temple, I removed this from about her neck,' his voice choked and he continued brokenly. 'I had thought—to keep it, but she would wish it to belong to you—and her wish has ever been my law.'

"He placed it about my neck and I could only grasp his hand in gratitude.

"The sun had scarcely reached the midway point from the horizon to the center of the heaven, when a bearer from the royal palace came to command our presence there. We hastily freshened ourselves, drew

about our shoulders our feathered capes and entered our palanquins.

"We were at once admitted to the presence of the king in the large audience chamber where he was seated alone upon the jaguar throne, with the usual court officers and priests about him.

" 'Ahmen,' he said, after he had acknowledged our salutes, 'twice have we attempted to offer you as a sacrifice to our gods, and twice has our plan failed. It is evident that you are not acceptable to them—their wrath would descend upon us in great punishment should we offend them thus again. But since yesterday's tragic happenings, my eyes have also been opened to many things which before were hidden from my sight. Many changes will there be in the land of *Luumilkay*.

" 'For long have I doubted your loyalty and your honor, but now I find I was led astray by false council and a hasty judgment. Let it now be known to all that to Ahmen, blood-brother of him called Canich, are returned all the honors and possessions that he once held, and he is again commander of ten thousand spears.'

" 'O King!' I answered, when the applause which followed these words had ceased, 'it was but a few *uinals* ago that I was adopted into this nation and became as one of you through the blood-brotherhood of Canich. Since that time has great misfortune overtaken me, leading me to the very stone of sacrifice, which I escaped by the breadth of but one hair. Willingly would I have so suffered, could I have saved that maid who now lies within the temple of *Hunabku*. Now has all hope for happiness fled from me. This I say, for

greatly did I love this maid, even as she returned my love.

" 'From now on until that time comes when I meet her in the ninth *caaen* of the Mayas, I can hope for no further happiness. Hear me, O Powerful One, be merciful as well as just. Every blade of grass, every beast in the field, every bird in the air in all *Luumilkay* will not let me rest. They will bring me memories; though ever sweet, yet will they be bitter, for this was the land of her birth—of her whom I loved. Hear me, O King, and grant that I may return to that country from which I came, that I might find peace and rest in her memory, who gave her life that I might live.'

"He gazed at me gravely, then turning to him who, with pale and worn face, stood at my side, he asked:

" 'What say you, Canich? Shall we release thy blood-brother from his oath and allegiance, permitting him to return to the land that gave him birth?'

" 'I would, Ahmen, my more than brother, that you remain in this happy land, take a wife to thy liking and name thy first-born by my name.'

" 'Yea,' spake the king. 'Choose thou a maid from any walk of life—the fairest in the land if you desire—even to my daughter, the Princess Royal.' At these words, my heart leaped within me, for did I not well know this false woman whom now I hated with a hatred equal to the love that once I bore her? But calm I held my face, for not on this day would I stir up strife, and I answered:

" 'I have had that which you call love and it is now but ashes in my heart. My only desire is to leave this world loveless, that I may in that great heaven beyond the clouds, meet her who gave her life for mine, with clean hands and a free heart.'

"The king said no more, but his face bore upon it a shade of sympathy as I left his royal presence.

"Within three days, I stood upon the road that led north at the place where it topped a low hill overlooking the city of Zacna. Already had I bade farewell to all who knew me, and to my body servant, Ahpec, whose sorrow was so great he scarce could find words to speak. Only Canich stood by my side. On the far side of the hill, a picked bodyguard awaited us. Together, we gazed upon the fair city which had been the scene of such tragedy and strife since I had entered its gates.

" 'Remember, Ahmen, the day when first we marched up the steps of yonder temple? Little did I think then that we should become brothers and share every emotion of life together, even to our love for the same maid. Think well upon your decision, brother, ere we depart from *Luumilkay* and you may not again return. Not yet is it too late to turn back,' he pleaded in a voice which trembled with emotion he did not try to conceal.

"Sadly I shook my head, though his words moved me greatly. 'Nay, brother, gladly would I return to live with thee through the years of my life, in brotherhood, but can you not know how it would be with thee? Think you not that since that day when you led me from the ruined temple of that city which I had named Multun, when I knew not your purpose in commanding me, even while I have been as one of your own countrymen, that my thoughts have not turned with sadness and longing toward my own country?

" 'My heart longs for the places of my youth, even

as would yours, were you long from the land of your birth. And how grievous has been my sojourn in your country, brother, how grievous!' And I turned about toward the mountains, lest he say more that would persuade me to change my decision.

"So we continued our journey; and when our bearers had toiled to the summit of the mountain, there we were lowered by long ropes down a great cliff, so steep that no man could either climb it or descend alone. Then the bearers made new litters of poles and vines and we journeyed on until we reached this very ruined city in which Canich had found me.

"Here we parted. He seized my shoulders in his hands and gazed straight into my eyes. 'I have loved you well, Ahmen, and this parting tears my heart. Yet would I not hold you back, for the memory of you will give happiness to my life forever.' Then, from his forefinger he took the ring which, on that first meeting within this same city of Multun, he had held up for my inspection, to declare his rank to me. 'That you may not, as the years add their swift-passing numbers to your life, forget your friend and blood-brother, I beg of you to wear this ring as a memory of my great love for you. Now, farewell, but be it only farewell; for we shall meet again when our spirits are called to the Great Star and the nine *caaens* of eternal happiness.'

" 'Farewell,' I answered in sorrow. 'You who have been brother and more, until then, farewell.'

"With these last words together upon this earth, we embraced for the space of a moment; then, loosing me, Canich turned and hurried back along the trail, where his bearers had preceded him.

"I stood and watched him go, his head upright and

his step firm, that none save I might know the sorrow that filled his heart. I breathed a prayer to the gods of the world that to him who deserved it as no man I knew—peace, happiness and contentment might come.

"Smaller and smaller he became as the distance between us grew, and ere he passed from sight, he turned with uplifted hand and gave me the Maya sign of good will and happiness."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AHMEN'S voice, which had grown weaker with each hour of the story's recital, ceased. For the second time as he spoke of Canich, the old man's voice broke, and his tears fell upon the rough stone floor. His chin sank upon his breast. Utter silence, except for his labored breathing, settled in that ancient edifice which served for their shelter. His tale had gripped Cranton from its beginning. Its tragic end wrung his heart. To Ahmen it had last been given to know love as few men know it; absorbingly complete, unselfish, transcending even death. And but a short time before he, Cranton, had been amused at the mere suggestion that this old Indian knew anything of women!

Now he seemed exhausted past all endurance; his narration had taken a tremendous toll upon his strength. Except for the brilliant points of light which peered from beneath his half-closed lids, he might have been asleep, so heavily and loudly was he breathing. Cranton hastily poured him a double measure of *xtabentun.* Unanswered questions still formed in his thoughts, yet he hesitated to ask the old man to extend his efforts. Finally:

"But was it Ixlol who had attempted to kill the king?" He was loath to return to reality from the dim past into which the strange story had carried him.

"Nay, *paal batab,* and even as I had known in my heart it could not be. As she was about to go to her gods, she had uttered these words, 'And now, all may say that it was I who attempted to kill the king as he

slept.' And, *batab,* what could those words have meant?—that she gave her life in vain for the cruel deed of her sister, whom the king finally learned was guilty and would have sent to her death, had she not discovered her danger and escaped from *Luumilkay* with Ekchan, whom the king banished, with threat of death upon his return.

"All this Canich told me as we journeyed to Multun, after leaving *Luumilkay.* He had learned from the king concerning these things ere we departed from Zacna, but had been enjoined to tell me nothing until we had left the country.

"Ixkan had attempted to kill her father because he had opposed her marriage to Ekchan, whom she did not love but who offered her the opportunity to become queen; and I, poor fool, was but a tool in her hands, to be thrown aside when she had finished with me. All the time she was fawning upon me, in her mind was her plan to make me her victim. And well you know how she carried out her plans. She had never intended to make me king—only to persuade me to join my warriors with Ekchan, that he might be victorious. Then, when her purpose did fail, she thought to still use me some way; and when Ekchan had lost in the battle against the king, she sought in another way to become the queen of *Luumilkay.*

"Little did I know when she met me within the cave that she had already attempted the crime of killing her own father which she sought to place upon me. First had she been alarmed at finding me there; then quickly came to her other thoughts, and she became a clever and dangerous woman. She saw a way to kill, as you say, two birds with one arrow. She would avoid suspicion on herself and at the same time get rid of me by

having me caught with my own dagger in my hand. Thus can you see what happens when a man becomes but *masa* in the hands of a woman with a devil inside her."

"But how did she happen to have your dagger?" Cranton wanted to know.

"Ah, *batab,* in the fight with Ekchan, as was the custom, I had thrown it aside. After the fight, Ekchan picked it up and gave it to Ixkan and once more they plotted together to seize the throne and to fix a crime on me. When she found me then within the cave and induced me to go to the scene of her crime, she had—what you call it—a perfect alibi. But though she brought tragedy to my life, her crime did not bring the results she sought—and crimes never do; for she was forced to flee with Ekchan for safety and it was but just punishment that they should afterward dwell together in their evil ways."

"Do you know what became of him, finally?"

"Aye, and well do you, since it was you who sent him to his death, risking your own life to save mine."

"You mean the old fellow—?" gasped Cranton, unable to believe that he had taken part in that weird drama, after all, though at its very conclusion—its postlude, one might say.

"The same. I had learned some time before that an old Indian who claimed to have been a prince in a great land to the south, had sought me in several villages. People called him crazy, but everywhere he told of seeking Ahmen, who had caused him great misfortune in his life. Well I knew who the stranger must be, and eager was I also to find him. None should wait in hiding to avenge himself on Ahmen. But never did our paths cross until that day we met—and you know the rest.

"And now *paal batab,* have I told you these strange things to open your eyes. Tarry not here to follow the work you have begun. There is plenty of time for exploring these ruined temples, now that you have found them and you alone know where they are—when more important matters have been settled.

"I, who read the minds of men, know that you doubt not the truth of the words I have spoken these last three suns. Still, one material proof of my words would I leave you. Go to yonder temple which stands upon the highest pyramid of this same ruined city and, with care, ascend to its top. There will you find the temple much in ruins and overgrown with bush and vine. Enter into the inner sanctuary beyond the outer corridor and search for a niche under the stone seat supported by crouching jaguars near the wall to the right of the doorway. There will you find that which will please your eye and the eye of another."

"The gold medallion!" exclaimed Cranton. "Do you mean it is there—in yonder temple?"

"Even so, *batab.* You must know that many eyes have looked with desire upon that which to me was more precious than gold. Therefore, to quiet the fear that held me as I passed through the country, inhabited only by savage tribes, that it might come by dishonest ways into the hand of others, I hid it where none save I could find it. Many times in my youthful days did I journey to this place to bring it forth to the light of day to look upon it and hold it in my hand while within my *zaztun* I saw her image, who once wore it. But the small piece which was severed from the whole by the dagger, did I carry upon my person."

"And you have that, also?"

"Nay, and I need not tell you where it is, for you

will soon possess that too, if you are wise as Ahmen believes you to be."

Cranton was surprised at his own keen disappointment in the reply. It seemed to him but a clever attempt of the old man's to evade the lack of evidence to the truth of his words. But he was now fumbling in his henequin bag and presently drew out the cloth-wrapped *zaztun,* polished it and set it before him, his sunken eyes gazing into its depths as if he were seeing distant visions. Finally, he announced, never lifting his gaze from the crystal:

"One thing more have I to say, my *paal batab,* ere I sink beneath the gates of rest. The end of my story is but the beginning of yours. Your path is clear—it leads to Merida. Oah, *batab,* do not cast away that most precious gift which is offered you. Spare yourself the anguish which has been mine these scores of years; take that which the gods have bestowed upon you."

With the last words his voice took on greater volume, again his eyes gleamed with the memories of his youth and suddenly he jumped to his feet, and like a smoldering fire stirred to life by a gust of wind, he sang a weird song of his youthful days. For a moment he wavered unsteadily, supporting himself on a crooked stick cut from the crotch of a small tree. Then he straightened himself up to his full stature, and lifting the stick above his head, he chanted:

"Oah, *paal batab,* young chief I call you, I am today but a withered stalk. Once was I young and strong like you, and the bright red blood coursed through my veins. But even now as my shaky limbs refuse to obey the commands of my heart, when I think of the days of my youth my blood leaps and my flesh tingles, and I become young again. My arm once more is strong, I

feel the *hulche* in my grasp, again I hear the blasts of the great *calabaza*-headed trumpets like the thunder of the gods.

"They call to me again as in days of old, they call me forth to battle. The boom of the mighty *tunkuls,* the stone drums of my fathers, is mingled with the hoarse yells from ten thousand throats. Oah! Oah! Those were the days—a thousand days rolled into one.

"My heart again beats fast and strong as in the days of my youth, it seeks to leap forth from my withered breast. Oah! Oah! Again I am the *holcan,* the *halach uinic,* the leader of ten thousand spears, ten thousand chosen ones.

"I raise my *hulche* on high, from ten thousand throats roll out the roar and thunder of the royal salute, '*Bolon Pixan ahau*—great is the soul of the king of the Mayas and Itzas.' It sways the trees of the forest like a mighty blast of wind from the mouth of the god of the north winds, *Xaman Ik* is his name. It rocks the stones of the mountains, it shakes the earth.

"I see again the regiments of warriors, ten thousand strong—the tigers, the hawks, the wild boars, the serpents. Oah! *paal batab,* I am strong again and young. They call to me, those chosen ones, those ten thousand, '*Bolonbatab! Bolonbatab!*' great chieftain! Before them I go. I am the chosen one of King Cocom, honored by *Yum Batel,* the god of war.

"I see again the lovely maidens with their *huipiles* made with the counted threads. They look with gladdening eyes, they see me pass at the head of the warrior legions, amid the clouds of dust and the tread of feet, as with swaying arms they march.

"The smell of sweat is in the air. Come ye *nacons,* and raise aloft the pole with its floating ribbons of

color! Place on high the royal shield of the smoking mountain, emblem of the Itza and Maya cities of *Luumilkay*. Let the breeze cast here and there the plumes of the royal *quetzal* bird. We go forth to battle gallant and strong. We go to fight for the land of *Luumilkay,* for the land we love.

"Oah! Oah! Not all come back! But what matters; for those who die will rest in the houses of the gods above the earth among the stars.

"Come friends, one and all, dance with us the dance of war, raise your voices with us to *caaen,* the Itza heaven. Come, see us throw the lance, see it cut the wind and sing like a bird in its flight, see it enter the mark straight and sure as our purpose. Swift as your youth it goes and strikes the mark no larger than the eye of a bird!

"Come, lend your voices to the music of the trumpets, shriek out your songs above the roar of the giant drums, the great *tunkuls,* the music we love, the music of battle. Then our hearts are courageous and grow big with pride.

"The god of war flies in a fiery cloud above us! Look! Look! See the god *Yum Batel!* See his spear of gold tipped with flint held high above his head! See the point, as it flashes fiery red in the sun! His body is among the lightning flashes! Ten thousand of us, the chosen ones, go with him! Oah! Oah!

"The women weep as we go forth; they tear at their breasts; their hair is in disarray; they wail in terror as we go forth to battle. But still they stay behind and weave the white and colored mantles embroidered with the counted threads of gold, that each of us may receive a token of their love, that each may receive his due.

"Their bosoms quiver as they think that we will return no more. We go forth and fight for love of our king and our land of *Luumilkay,* and soon all that is left to those behind is the great cloud of dust hiding and enfolding us from their tearful eyes. They see us no more! They wait, those tearful ones! Be brave of heart, you maids and wives and mothers, for some of us will return wrapped in skins of deers to be laid in the tombs of our fathers, where our names will be written in letters of gold and placed in high places.

"Weep no more, you tearful ones! But wait, wait to give us welcome as we come back dragging with us the great black, hairy warriors. They shall be food for our temples and gods of war! They shall lie on the stone of sacrifice and give up their hearts into the mouths of the golden images of *Yum Batel,* the god of war! Oah! Oah!

"Those were the days, *paal batab,* that have passed and have been blown away like the dead leaves from the trees; but yet may I be young once more and again grasp the *hulche* in my strong right arm; for we, the Mayas, die not as do the white men. *'U Ma Cimil,'* we say—there is no death. And when I have passed to the gods above, from them I shall receive a new life in exchange for this old decrepit shell that will hold my soul but for a short time longer.

"Such are the thoughts of the Mayas, *paal batab,* and who can say that within those thoughts may not lie much truth?

"And so, *batab,* I know that those I so greatly loved will keep their promise to await me at the Gates of *Tankul,* from where we may journey together to the ninth *caaen.* As Ixlol taught me in those last days be-

fore she gave her life for mine—will true love live on through many heavens, and even to infinity."

As he uttered the last words, a queer expression came over his face—one which Cranton had never witnessed before. Was it the effect of the firelight?

His arms reached out, his eyes were fixed and staring upward. A light seemed to illumine his withered face with a transfigured glory and his next words came in gasps:

"Oah, oah—I see the gates of *Tankul*—nearer—nearer—two waiting there—Canich—Ixlol—I come—I come—"

The erect form swayed for an instant, then as Cranton jumped to his feet and before he could reach him, the old man crashed to the floor.

He had sung his own chant of death in the ancient language of Zacna. He had worked himself into a frenzy which had proved too much for his weakened heart, as he stabbed and slashed the air right and left with his stick.

Tenderly they raised his inert body and laid it upon a blanket, reverently Cranton covered his face with the cloth in which he had always carried his cherished *zaztun,* which at the last had failed to reveal to him his end—or had it?

For a long time the young explorer sat upon a stone beside the lifeless form, revolving in his mind the old wizard's strange tale. He had loved the old fellow. How much of his story could he believe? Was it a product of the seer's imagination, conjured for his entertainment and benefit, or virtually a true story of his past? He wondered what was concealed in that particular niche in yonder temple—if anything.

Determined to satisfy his curiosity, he called to

Lupe, and discovered that he was still beside him. "Get a lantern, but be quiet about it; don't wake the other boys. We're going over to the temple to investigate."

"Yes, master, to find the gold medallion," and he was back in an instant with the lighted lantern in one hand and some tools in the other.

Cautiously, they began the steep ascent of the pyramid. The washing rains, the roots of rapidly growing plants and the loose stones of the great stairway threatened to prevent their reaching the summit. But at last they had pressed their way through the tangled bushes and stood before the temple door. The feeble glow of the lantern cast weird shadows all about them as they entered the doorway, which was divided by two massive columns, and crossed the outer corridor.

Directly opposite the entrance was the shrine—a small room built within the larger; but Ahmen had not foreseen what had happened there. At the spot where the stone slab, supported by crouching jaguars, should have been, was a mound of debris where a section of the roof and wall had caved in. It would be a stupendous task to remove the fallen stone and mortar, but, aside from his sentimental reasons, any archaeologist would have cleared away far more than that, believing that he would find an engraved golden medallion of the ancient Mayas as a reward.

Lupe set down the lantern and leaned upon the pick and shovel which he carried. "Lots of stone, master," he grinned ruefully, shaking his head.

Cranton took the pick from his hands, nodding his head, and together they attacked the mound, changing off from time to time to ease their aching backs.

It was in the first pale light of the morning that Lupe's glad cry announced that their night's work had

been successful. His pick had levered up the top of a stone seat, revealing a small niche. He stood ceremoniously aside, while his master reached with an unsteady hand into the crevice, pushed away the dirt that had fallen in with its opening, and touched a hard object.

Brought to the light, it proved to be a queer looking metal box which appeared to have no opening. But Lupe was on his knees gazing up at the bottom of the box; and sure enough, when Cranton turned it over, he found a thin line into which he inserted his knife blade and a quick pull lifted one whole side. Within, was a smaller box of *sapote* wood which, though fairly well preserved, revealed signs of its antiquity, for in places it was cracked and crumbled.

The inner box was locked, but in the niche they found a worn leather bag containing a key which fitted it, and when opened—there lay the medallion and chain, wrapped in a soft material from the *pochete* cotton tree.

For a time they gazed at the jewel without speaking. It was delicately wrought and bore on its face the royal insignia of that ancient line—the Kings of Cocom—proclaiming beyond a shadow of doubt that it had once adorned the neck of a princess of royal blood and, what was more awesome, the authenticity of Ahmen's tale.

For a portion of it was gone and on its back were several dark stains—the discovery of which was a momentary shock to Cranton—for these must have been made when Ixlol defying the king and the priests on the platform of sacrifice in that distant city of Zacna, had glorified her love with the sacrifice of her life.

He wondered where the rest of the plaque could be —then his heart gave a sudden leap. As this was real—

likewise was there no doubt that he should return to Merida at once, upon Ahmen's advice.

When he finally sought his hammock, he could not sleep. Ahmen, Ixlol, the gold medallion, Dolores, Lolita—around and around, the circle gyrated in his thoughts. Vivid memories of the sisters and countless incidents which had betrayed their characters to him besieged his mind for consideration. Had he loved Dolores as much as he believed, or had her intriguing beauty only fascinated him? Had not Lolita, when he had found her grown to womanhood, struck a vibrant and heretofore dormant chord in his heart, to which he had been heedless in his headlong determination to win Dolores—more the culmination of too long years of dreaming and anticipation? Should he now return to Merida? Foolish of course, to credit Ahmen's *zaztun* with revelations—still, there could be no harm in returning for a short rest before he began his work of excavation here. The path was now open, the return would be easy and when the rainy season had ended, he could work to better advantage. If both Dolores and Lolita were married, he could at least return to his work with peace of mind and a determination to forget—or remember, as Ahmen had done.

Remember what—whom? Why, his love for Lolita, of course—his dear little playmate who had repeatedly and in a hundred different ways, told him that she loved him. Like a mighty tide, the realization that it was indeed Lolita whom he loved—had always loved—surged over him, the force and sheer beauty of it awed him. Had Ahmen surmised what he himself had been too blind to understand? Or had his love for Lolita, due to her resemblance to Ixlol, and his love for the

man who had saved his life, prompted him to an effort to unite them?

He recalled his impulsive request of Lolita on the night of the ball—to return to him the ring—and of his equally impulsive decision to let her keep it. He had then thought it was because of her reluctance to part with it—now he knew it was because unconsciously, he had wished for her happiness above everything—that her words and manner had betrayed her wish and its fulfillment had involved his own happiness. Well he realized now what her wish had been which had made her appear so self-conscious, yet eager to keep the ring.

Yet, to what avail was his love for Lolita? If there was a possibility that one of the girls would be freed from her childhood betrothal, it would be Dolores. It was Sanchez who had incurred Cocom's displeasure. Had Ahmen's *zaztun* actually shown him the situation in Merida? There was only one way to find out—to return to Merida at once.

Next day, they laid the remains of the old wizard, and his *zaztun,* in a tomb beneath the floor of the ruined temple of his fathers, having first thrown out the decayed bones of a former occupant. They covered his face with the *zaztun* cloth and over him laid a blanket made of leaves from the *ramon* tree. Then, with much effort, they dragged up a slab of stone from below and laid it over him. Cranton recited a Maya prayer which the old man himself had taught him; and the service was ended. According to his belief, his body was now but an empty shell. He had gone to dwell with his ancestors where, in due time, he would receive a new body for his dwelling place. Again he would be young and strong; again he would lead his warriors to battle.

The ancient city seemed more gloomy than when they had first discovered it almost a week before. Then, it had been deserted; now it was desolate. Having made his decision to return to Merida, Cranton determined to start at once. He made arrangements for Lupe to accompany him with all possible speed, while the boys remained at Multun, content with the prospect of several weeks of idle comfort until he should return to begin operations.

And after that—perhaps he would organize an expedition to search for Zacna in the distant mountains to the south, in the valley of *Luumilkay*. If such a city had been inhabited some three score years before, according to Ahmen's story, why was it not possible that it still existed? At any rate, the possibility of it had but strengthened his determination to seek for such a city —to realize the ambition of his career.

The journey back to Merida was less difficult. Their path was clear and the rain seemed to have abated. Perhaps the hope which spurred him on made the journey less arduous; at any rate, they arrived in Merida in less than half the time it had taken them to find Multun.

His heart almost choked in his throat when with trembling hands, he rang the bell at the door of Pedro Cocom, shortly after the dinner hour. Maria opened it and, having greeted him heartily, informed him that he would find the master in the library.

Pedro Cocom was settled comfortably in a deep arm chair, his back half toward the door, reading, and so deeply engrossed in his book that he had not heard Cranton's footsteps. No one else was in sight; not a sound was heard throughout the house. Cranton's heart

sank. Had the girls indeed left their father's house for homes of their own? He felt oppressed, despondent.

Presently Cocom seemed to sense the presence of another in the room. He looked up quickly and stared for one incredulous moment. Then, throwing the book aside, he jumped to his feet and greeted the newcomer in hearty Yucatan fashion.

"My boy! You are a most welcome sight for these eyes of mine. But tell me, your return to Merida is surely unexpected, is it not so? Has something happened?"

"Yes, *Señor,* much. But tell me, what has happened here?"

Cocom regarded him sagaciously. "Sit down. One look at your face tells me why you have come. It is that you just could not stay away. But I fear you will be very much disappointed."

"Why—?" But the words stuck in his throat. As he had feared—he was too late!

"As I promised you, I got to the bottom of that accident and had a few surprises. It was not Sanchez, after all, who attempted to injure us. Perez, who had been in love with Dolores, it seems, sought in that way to avenge himself upon you and at the same time to discredit Sanchez in my estimation. Well, as it turned out, I had no voice in the matter, anyway. Dolores eloped with Perez to the States. Perhaps, in a way, it is best. Dolores has been a difficult daughter, with her willful ways. And you will have to forget, my boy—"

"That suits me all right, *Señor,"* eagerly, as hope mounted. "But Lolita—where is she? Then she did not marry Perez? Was she—?"

"Lolita? My jewel," nodded Cocom. "Such loyalty and kindness in a daughter have few fathers. Look into

the garden," he pointed proudly. "She is standing in the shadow of the wall beside the fountain—" but to his astonishment, Cranton had risen abruptly and strode from the room, fumbling in his pocket for something which he drew out as he approached Lolita. Puzzled and unaware of his action, Cocom watched from where he sat.

Cranton found her standing with her back toward him, gazing into the splashing fountain, as upon that memorable night not so long ago, when he had mistaken her for Dolores. As then, she did not turn about at his approach. Quietly, he stepped behind her and threw the delicate golden chain carrying the half medallion, over her head. With a gasp of surprise she turned about to face him. For a poignant moment they faced each other while the expression of amazement on her face changed slowly to one of joyous entreaty and she half extended her hand in a supplicating gesture.

"Oh, *Tomasito!* You've come back? And—and you love me? You love me!" she repeated in a voice that was almost a whisper.

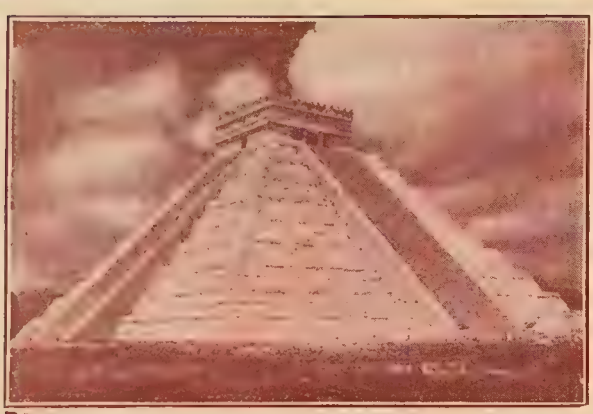
Cocom discreetly turned away and winked slyly at the ancient golden image on his desk. "Will wonders never cease?" he exclaimed, shaking his head with huge satisfaction.

Some time later, Lolita slipped from Cranton's arms and, taking up the half disk of gold, fitted into it the portion Ahmen had given her, which she had been holding in her hand.

"Where? How—?" he exclaimed.

"See how perfectly they fit together," she smiled shyly.

THE END



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